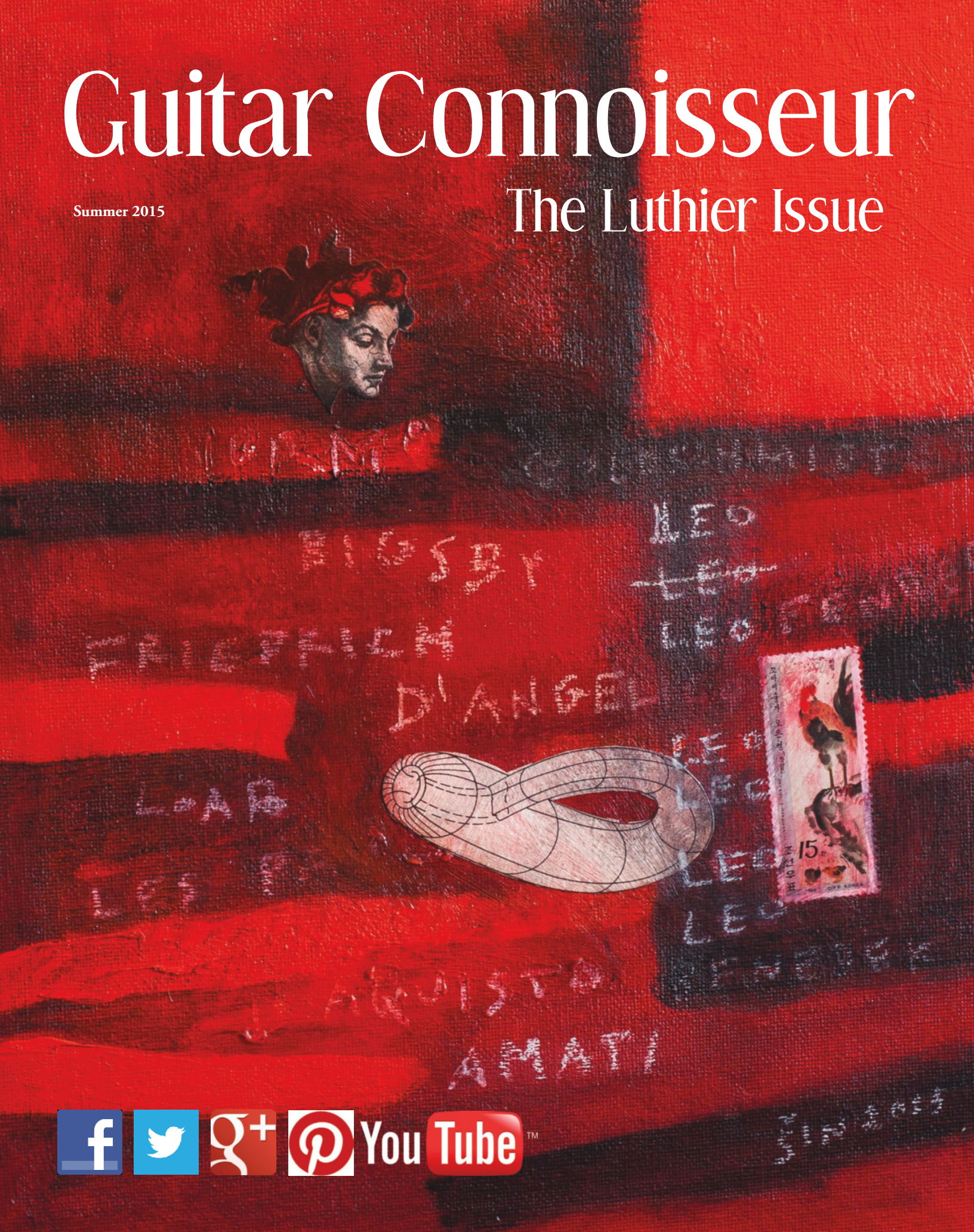
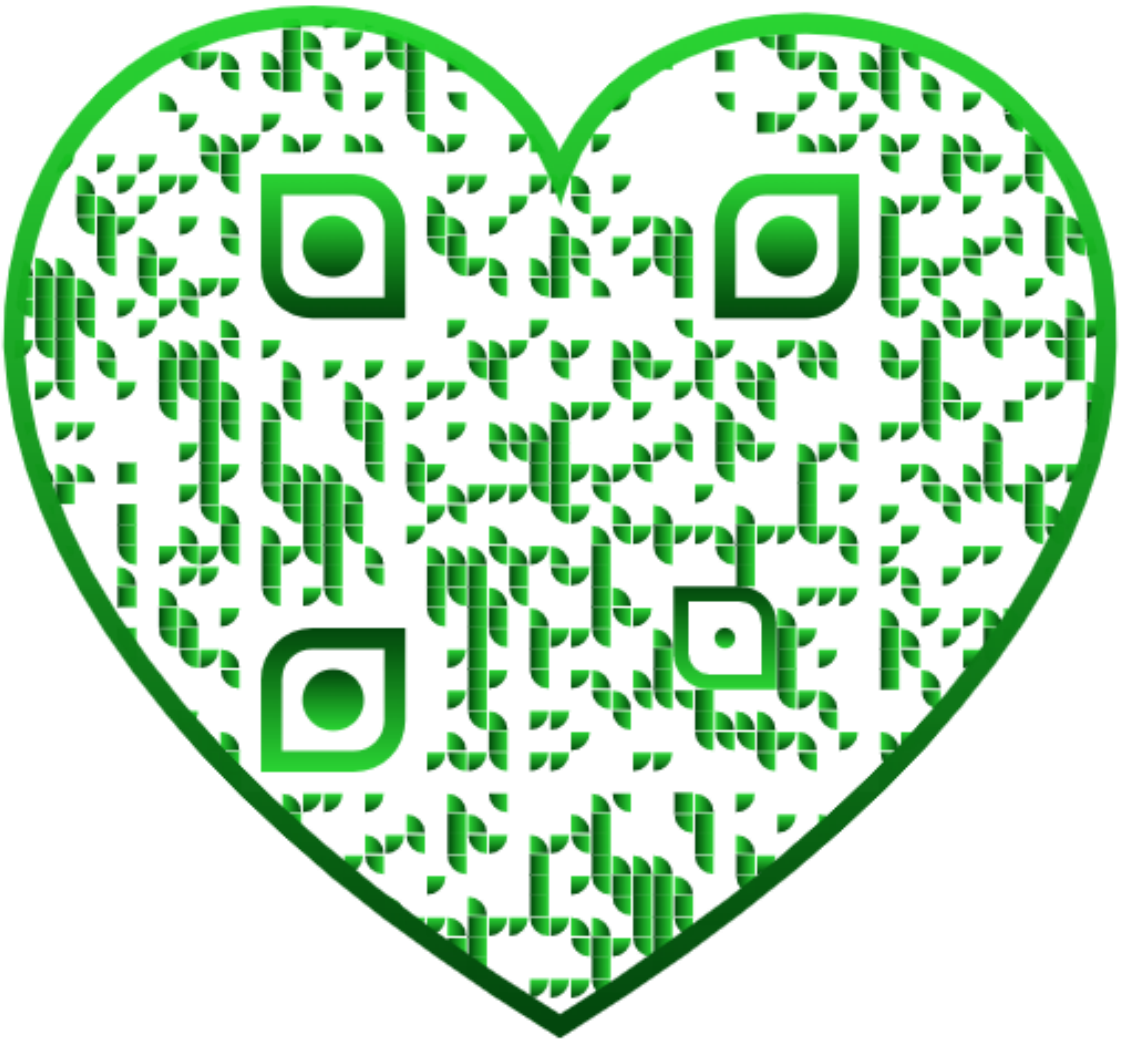
Guitar Connoisseur

The Luthier Issue

Summer 2015





contributors

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Founder/Editor in Chief at Guitar Connoisseur

Kelcey Alonzo is a New York City based guitar collector and player. Prior to establishing a small exclusive boutique instrument business; leading into the publishing of Guitar Connoisseur, Alonzo worked full time in the print media industry, specializing in photo retouching for leading fashion magazines. Channeling this expertise into the creation of a sophisticated periodical, celebrating contemporary craft luthiery is the realization of a dream.

PASQUALE "PAT" BIANCULLI

Columnist/Pro Musician/Educator

Born and raised in Brooklyn NY, Pasquale "Pat" Bianculli, studied classical guitar with Jerry Willard and Edgard Dana, at the Guitar Workshop in Oyster Bay, NY. He received his M. Mus. degree from the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1981. The same year, he had the honor of performing for the legendary guitarist, Andres Segovia, in Granada, Spain. As a recitalist, he has been heard across the U.S., Canada, Europe and the Caribbean. In 1983, he made his New York solo debut at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. Both he and his wife, flutist, Kathy McDonald, have shared music teaching careers, and continue to consult as well as record and perform their own works.

www.fluteandguitarduo.com

JESSE IAN HOPKINS

Columnist/Luthier

A 1998 graduate of the Galloup School of Lutherie, Jesse has worked as a repair technician for a number of local music stores in the Detroit, MI area. He also built guitars for Reverend Musical Instruments from 2000 to 2006 before being hired as a custom luthier at First Act Inc's Studio For Artists in Boston, MA.

After returning to Michigan in 2007, Jesse built the first in a series of prototypes of what would become his own personal line of guitars. In 2010, with the help of his father Larry, J&L Guitar Company was formally launched and the resulting instruments are a marriage of classic aesthetics and modern design. These elements are brought together using traditional "by hand" building techniques and only the finest woods and hardware.

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GREG JONES

Drummer/Songwriter/Coffee Expert

Greg Jones is a songwriter and drummer with a flair for doing things differently. His progressive rock band PINNACLE has played at music festivals and theaters, opened for Spock's Beard and Riverside and served as backing band for Nick D'Virgilio at a concert on his first solo tour. He is also an avid music fan, once traveling 6,000 miles one way just to see a band in concert. He is also a world-reknowned coffee expert and author of the upcoming book No Ordinary Joe. His favorite instrument of all? The electric guitar.

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ROD DEGEORGE

Columnist/Pro Musician/Educator

Rod DeGeorge is a guitar teacher, live performer and highly prolific session musician. He has written, recorded and produced commercial jingles and compositions for several national ad campaigns and other television projects. Rod has shared the stage with various well known musicians as a sideman. As a composer he has also released solo material, and was featured by Guitar Player Magazine, reviewing the title track of his Cosmic Playground instrumental album. As a teacher, Rod developed "Future of Music", an educational program which received praise and support from The United Way.

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contributors

BRAD MAHON

Columnist/Pro Musician/Educator

Brad Mahon has appeared throughout Portugal, the United States, and across his native Canada, as an award winning and acclaimed guitarist, educator, and scholar. He enjoys a multi-faceted, professional career working consistently and simultaneously for several universities and conservatories in addition to touring and recording with the Oberon Guitar Trio, East West Guitar Duo, and as a soloist. His formal education is highlighted by a Doctorate in Musicology from the University of Calgary. Originally from Montreal, Quebec, Brad now lives in Cochrane, Alberta and sometimes, in Kimberley, British Columbia.

RAÚL RODRIGUEZ

Columnist/Luthier

Raúl Rodriguez was born in Gijón a small town in the north of Spain. His father is a musician , so musical instruments and records where around and they caught his attention at early age. He studied music, guitar and bass, and after years of playing he developed an interest about guitar technology. He took woodworking courses, early music plucked instrument building courses, where he learned to build baroque guitar, vihuela and viola de gamba, and using books and videos he learned about guitar building and repair. During three years he worked at the Manuel Rodriguez workshop doing different processes on the buildindg of a classical and flamenco guitar. For a period of two years he has been collaborating with ISP magazine writing articles about different technical aspects of the guitar. Nowadays he is running his own guitar repair workshop, giving service to professional and amateur musicians.

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ANTOINE GEDROYC

Columnist/Luthier

Born in Paris, France in 1973 from a British father and a French Mother. Antoine started building and restoring everything from solid bodies to basses, acoustic flat and arch tops, and exotic instruments. After working in guitar stores as a repairman, running several stores, working as a guitar Tech, road managers on tours and Festivals, working on guitar shows, he moved to Vancouver Canada then Copenhagen Denmark to open his own workshop. Specializing in Vintage restoration but also one off custom builds. Now living in Savannah GA for 3 years and working with vintage guitars and fine instruments.

JMELZ DURSTON

Writer/Musician

Melz Durston is a British born Media and Creative Studies graduate & freelance writer who has also studied in Finland where she experienced a serious introduction to boutique guitar culture in covering Finnish luthiers for a Juha Ruokangas feature published by a UK based guitar magazine. She has also had work published with UK publications Q, the NME, a local newspaper and a Barcelona-based magazine. Currently working on her masters thesis, Melz has a myriad of interests & pursuits; too numerous to mention here— also at the risk of intimidating to our other/male contributors. Mostly, we love her writing style and the lively vibe she brings to GC.

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Editor's Notes

Hello again, and welcome to our Summer Issue. Let me start by expressing my gratitude to all of the readers who have kept up with us. Last month marked the 3rd year since I launched Guitar Connoisseur and I have to say it's been a hell of a ride, I've met so many wonderful writers, photographers and readers and I'm looking forward to continuing this journey with you all.

So let's get into this issue, I wanted to showcase luthiers from a different perspective, instead of doing the tired old interviews with luthiers and inquire about "how they became interested in building" I wanted to give you guys another perspective.

In this issue you will find a mixed bag of editorial where you will hear from the Luthiers Directly or from one of our writers.

On the artist side, we've got a nice conversation between Guitar Connoisseur contributor Greg Jones and Jimmy Vivino from Conan O'Brien' basic cable band, this is one of my favorite pieces we've ever published…you'll see.

Finally the highlight of this issue for me of course is, none other than Joe Satriani, I've been a fan since surfing with the Alien and to have what I would consider to be a huge influence on me as a guitar player and one of my all time heroes, let's just say I'm over the moon with this issue.

One important thing that brings every Issue of Guitar Connoisseur together is the photography. I would like to thank photographers, Kim Mancuso, Rick Gilbert, Mark Lloyd, Derek Brad and Artist Oliver Sin who always gives us beautiful covers.

Kelcey Alonzo
Editor in Chief, Guitar Connoisseur

PS: All typos are intentional

Paul Reed Smith Blows Against the Empire

(Luthier: One who makes and/or repairs stringed musical instruments such as violins or guitars.)"

By Cliff Rhys James

In this highly refracted world, Carlos Santana and Ted Nugent probably don't see eye to eye on much when it comes to life, religion or politics, but the two famous guitar slingers do agree on one thing: Paul Reed Smith designs and builds the slickest playing, most luscious sounding, aesthetically pleasing guitars money can buy. Terrible Teddy, or The Motor City Madman (two of Nugent's many sobriquets) may have been one of the first of the high profile psychedelic string benders to embrace Smith's creations and Carlos Santana is perhaps the most universally acclaimed guitarist to do so, but the play list of legendary ax men who insist on PRS as their main ride is a long and illustrious one that grows over time like the hands of a clock turning.

From the classical arpeggios of formally trained acoustic musicians to the cool sizzle of jazz guitarists, and from signature rock riffs that turn listeners into writhing air guitarists to the wrecking ball crunch of speed metal shredders; PRS Guitars deliver the kind of sonic effect sought by virtuosos, head-bangers and journeymen alike.

"People get ready, there's a train a comin'..."

Stick a pin in Yorba Linda on a wall map of Southern California. Draw a straight line out from that point for a scaled distance of twenty miles. Call it a radius. Now swing it 360 degrees so it describes a circle. For twenty one years I spent a lot of time inside that circle living in the community's rolling hills amidst the spangles of an incandescent sun and the ever present rustle of palm trees. There, on silky smooth summer nights saturated by the sweet scent of Jasmine and with klieg lights carving up the darkness like a 1939 Hollywood premier, I could look out at the Disneyland fireworks far off in the distance. At times there was an otherworldly feel to it – like some nocturnal dreamscape rising up into wakeful reality.

Anyway, in the movie Field of Dreams, the main character played by Kevin Costner obeys a voice that whispers to him, "Build it and they will come." My personalized corollary to this, especially at is applies to musical pioneers is, "Build it and Cliff will come - probably later rather than sooner, but eventually he'll make it."

That was the case with each of my belated visits to the lost and forgotten shrines of the original prophets of Boom in Anaheim, Santa Ana, Fullerton and parts of Los Angeles,

California where the names of Adolph Rickenbacker, George Beauchamp, Paul Bigsby and Leo Fender still echo, however faintly, down the dimly lit corridors of time. They were the searchers and seekers; the guys who set out to renovate sound and expand the echo; the advance scouts probing for passageways on the electric frontier.

For the longest time I never realized these pioneers awoke each day to go about trying and failing and then trying again and failing again until at last they succeeded inside that twenty mile radius. Hell, like most folks, I knew the Beach Boys created Southern California's surf music vibe only thirty odd miles west of me. And I knew that not too many years later everyone from country / folk rockers to lizard kings, and from psychedelic trippers to the bluesy vanguard of the British Invasion would cruise up and down Sunset Strip between the Whiskey a Go-Go and Laurel Canyon on that magical mystery tour. But it took me awhile to discover where decades earlier those latter day luthiers and seminal electron boys tore it up each day trying to decode the future.

Which is a long way of saying - now that I've moved back to the Mid-Atlantic States, I've come for one of my belated visits to a shrine – only this one isn't lost and forgotten. This one is a flourishing temple of tumultuous expression in Stevensville, Maryland. Or wait! Maybe it's a not so secret laboratory where modern day alchemists turn common everyday materials into rare and sparkling gems; where the wizards of wood and steel harness free electrons to conjure up the magic and ride the lightning. Okay, okay... you see, I'm pretty sure Paul Reed

Smith heard the same voice as that Costner character because sure enough he built it, and sure enough they came – lots of them from all over this highly refracted world. And now, later rather than sooner but better late than never, I've come as well.

How long does it take for the great wheel to go around? Let me drill down a bit to explain. Burning through the restless generations of two centuries over all that raw land rolling across this American continent there's been a long line of musical trailblazers. They were a driven together and driven apart mix of tool and die men, scrappy business promoters, poets, musicians and electron freaks all powered by a hungering spirit. And like all prophets before their time shunned by the reigning kings of history, they stumbled down that lonely road of discovery to freedom's beating heart. For some it was the road to ruin – the kind of heavy attrition that implodes into bankruptcy when those in dogged pursuit of a dream run out of time and money. For others it was a road of reward. For many that road led one way – west to where the nation shouldered up to the Pacific.

But unlike their 16th and 17th century European ancestors, these latter day luthiers were neither the deferential nor reverential kind. They were never content to grind away at the margins of inherited tradition. No, this enterprising crew was something else and nothing if not bold. They were a hurtling high speed train load of idiosyncratic perfectionists called by fate and compelled by larger forces to live out their lives at the sonic intersection of art and science - of music and technology. And just when everyone figured all was quiet on the western front, these mavericks delivered heavy ordinance down range on an unsuspecting culture. I call it the original shock and awe campaign that shattered the peace between the two great world wars and challenged the established order of music, of culture, of just about everything. It was time for Ludwig Van Beethoven to roll over in his grave because Johnny B. Goode was fixin' to dial it up.

When the smoke cleared and the dust settled, a slow dawning realization took hold. They

had not only captured thunder and lightning in a bottle and called it the electric guitar, they'd lit off the wildfire of rock n roll that burned coast to coast before leaping the North Atlantic fire break to ignite blazes in Britain and eventually most of Europe. These were blows against the empire – serious blows.

"And it burns, burns, burns – that ring of fire..."

Today many of those pioneers are described by trendy business strategists and buzzword addicts as "DISRUPTERS". Who would a thunk that this enterprising band of string benders and vacuum tube geeks laboring away in the analog star chamber of a Post WW I world amidst the 60 cycle hum and buzzing static would later be celebrated in B Schools as Disruptive Innovators?

Some were willful dreamers, others skillful schemers, but they all shared an urgent need to seize the audible world they'd inherited and jack it up with the big sound of something bold and new – with all that crackling power. They were a strange brew standing astride the chasm that divides musical genres - that separates the status quo from the great unknown. And if they were haunted by questions, they were also fortified with enough true American grit to dig down deep and discover the answers.

In man's never ending search for meaning, they found theirs in building the better beast and in composing the soundtrack of our lives – even if it was heavily distorted and overdubbed. The basic tool kit consisting of two items was simple enough. The first was an amplifier / speaker. The second and most subversive tool of all was looked upon by some as the weapon of choice, but by others as the preferred instrument of redemption. For all of them it represented the cranked up, fully charged, electrified future. It lit up the radar screen and set off all the alarm bells; it upset the neighbors and in the days before and after the thermonuclear Jeanie escaped the bottle it scared hell out of the Russians. And no wonder, in the right hands it sounded like the unleashed hell-storm of a ball turret gunner in a B -17 hosing down Messerschmitt's with all nine yards from his twin 50 calibers. The guys who strapped it on to ride the lightning called it an Axe, but to everyone else it was the electric guitar.

This lineage, it's a messy meandering one strewn with the wreckage of failed attempts and blind runs down dark alleys, of miscalculation and confusion because that's the nature of discovery. It's also nature's way of dishing out challenges to all comers regardless of

Paul Reed Smith

discipline or domain who would seek to upend the status quo. "You see the immensity of all this?" Nature seems to taunt. "You want some of this immutable mind boggling stuff present at the creation that is matter and energy and musical vibration all bound up by the weight of history? Come and get it – if you dare."

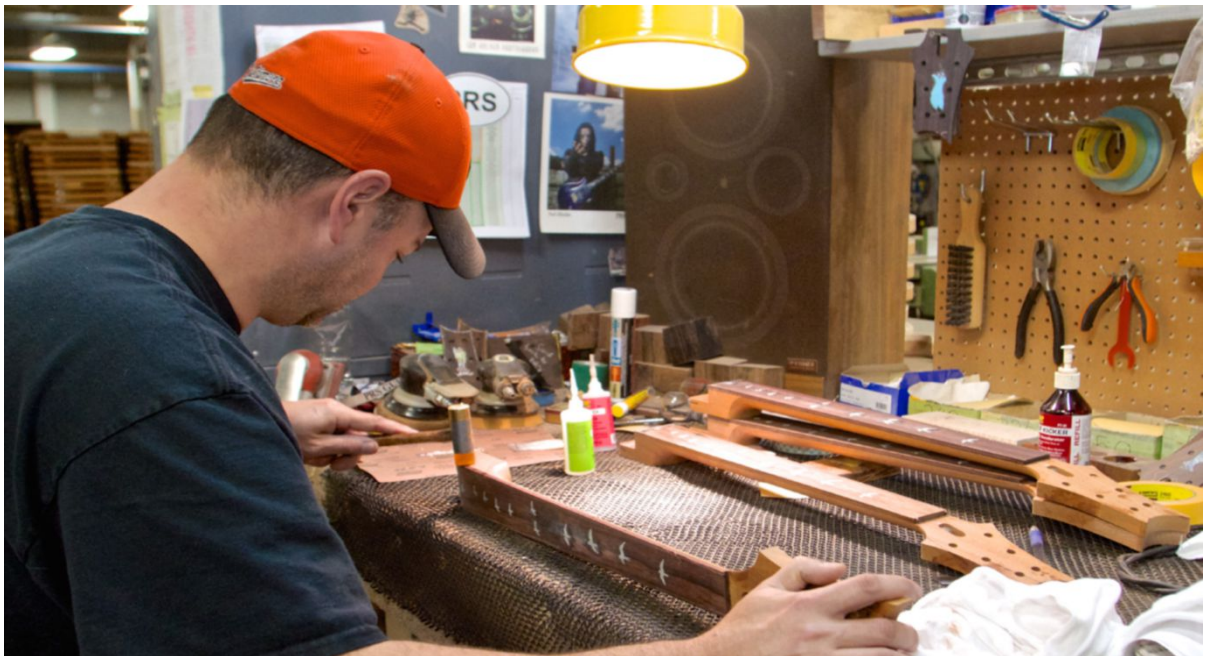
Well...Adolph Rickenbacker and George Beauchamp dared; they lit the fuse in Los Angeles. And F.C. Hall dared; he pushed the envelope in Anaheim. Leo Fender, he dared as much if not more than most and by God he pulled the trigger in Fullerton, Ca. where they named a street after him. And after Orville Gibson built the launch pad way up in the north-country of Kalamazoo, Ted McCarty blasted off into outer space. They both dared – big time.

And so does Paul Reed Smith; he dared while wandering around Bowie, Md. in his flower child days with a handful of wood and a head full of dreams. And he dared even more when he set up a one man shop in Annapolis to crank out his creations one guitar at a time. Eventually he double dog dared fate itself when he moved the whole arsenal east across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge to Stevensville in 1995 and built a fortress from which to take on the world and deliver blows against the empire.

In the few photographs I've seen of Paul Reed Smith, he's always smiling back at me in a warm and friendly way. He appears easy going and content like one might readily picture a man who has not only survived but thrived in a lifelong labor of love. In the hard fought sweepstakes of life – he's a winner. There almost seems to be a soft glow of serenity enshrouding him in those pictures. The casual and relaxed air, the graying short cropped hair, the wire rimmed glasses behind which his intelligent eyes sparkle with a look of bemused enjoyment. And first impressions leading to second impressions being what they are, it's all too easy for some to picture this smiling man as soft spoken, reserved, perhaps even unassertive.

But I have my doubts. I have a working hypothesis which I've repeatedly tested against observable reality over a lifetime of encounters. It posits that deep in the interior reaches of hardworking and friendly men like Paul Reed Smith there's a bubbling cauldron - a fire in the belly

Paul Reed Smith



that won't be denied. That beneath the pleasant smile lies a man who has been, like tempered high tensile strength steel, annealed by the heat and pressure, and quenched by the fire. That's not to suggest that he's hard or mean spirited. I don't mean that at all. What I do mean is that Paul Reed Smith is not easily displaced from the trajectory of his will. That's my hypothesis anyway and I'm here today meeting him for the first time to test it.

Jeanne Nooney, Public Relations & Events Coordinator for PRS is taking me on a fascinating one hour tour of their production facilities. She's a very hospitable well-informed guide and ready source of answers. (Full Disclosure: in a previous life I managed several factories for a famous Fortune 50 company and so I have an experienced eye for manufacturing processes.) On the one hand I find state of the art industrial gear like Computerized Numerical Control machine tools that rough cut the wood stock and temperature controlled industrial ovens that drive the Chesapeake Bay area's high humidity down to 6% or less in all processed wood. If there's an element of engineered precision and automated production – this is it. At the same time Jeanne leads me through department after department where specialists and job shop type craftsmen lovingly customize each guitar on individual work benches. Here small batches of like models are broken down into single instruments for detailed hand work. This is the place where a long list of PRS perfected innovations are built into each and every "axe" that carries the PRS headstock signature. It's where art meets science – where the ready to go kinetic energy gets wound tight - where blows are delivered against the empire.

But almost without exception I encounter something here that strikes me as clearly outside my past experience with production facilities; everyone seems intensely absorbed and genuinely committed to what they're doing in a friendly, dare I say almost joyous kind of way. This place is like a home for an extended family of craftsmen, crafts-women and music lovers from across the generations and genres for whom this is much more

than a paycheck. Jeanne and I stop to observe a....is he a craftsman? Or maybe he's an artist. Actually, I quickly conclude he's both and he's applying a beautiful rich hand rubbed color coat to the guitar body which makes the wood's natural grain pop to life. Even after I tell him he reminds me of Ozzie Osbourne he never looks up. He continues on expertly rubbing gorgeous color into the wood for another ten or fifteen seconds before finally smiling and saying, "I'll take that as a compliment." Jeanne tells me that he's personally created and customized many of the blends.

Moments later in what I call the "winding department" I quickly inspect the custom built machine that winds various strands of copper wire around the iron core to create the guitar pickups – the electromagnetic devices that start the induced conversion of vibrating strings into sound. This is home of the hum bucker, as well as other kinds and styles of "pick-ups."

The tour ends in the clean and quiet room where each guitar is final inspected, briefly played and expertly tuned before being laid tenderly in a customized case for shipping. You see, when you buy a PRS guitar you can take it out of the case, walk on stage, plug in and rock. Or, you can sit down on all by yourself in your kitchen and noodle away.

Waiting in the hallway outside the closed door to Paul's office, my mind wanders back over random bits of article research: his involvement in charitable causes like raising money for cancer research with Johns Hopkins Medical Center; the fact that he built his first guitar because he wanted to play but couldn't afford one; his relentless striving for guitars that "look, feel and play like a million bucks"; his absolute insistence upon instruments that, not unlike the people who play them, "are as alive as they can possibly be."

Then, the door suddenly flings open. When I see Paul Reed Smith in person for the very first time he's coming at me like, well, like a hurtling high speed train. Veering off at a slight angle so as not to run me over, he sails past a group of us in the hallway with that big eyed grin of his saying to everyone and no one alike, "Hey, you wanna' hear a great sounding guitar?" But of course it's a rhetorical question and besides, he's not waiting for an answer. "Follow me," he shouts excitedly. And so we do; Jeanne and I and several others fall into line like box cars behind a locomotive and the next thing I know we're all standing inside a room where some master luthiers are talking in hushed tones. Paul grabs the guitar and starts picking and strumming it. His eyes swim with delight and the grin on his face spreads wider. "Yeah, that's beautiful," he murmurs. He powers through some chords, throws a few licks into a brief solo and then holds the instrument up vertically, spinning it this way and that showing off the rich and resonant sustain. Now he's asking questions in rapid fire succession, but most of them come down to "how did this happen?" A master luthier mumbles something about starting out with thicker material and then.....but it gets lost in the buzzing excitement of multiple conversations among the disciples of sound. Paul's on and off the cell phone while this unfolds but obviously pleased with it all. Then, he turns to leave. We're following him out when he says back over his shoulder, "Better make another one just like it because that one should stay here."

A minute later we're in Paul's office where I find myself sitting at the end of a long conference room table. Jeanne is on my left and Paul is to the right. He eyes me up now as if for the first time, then looks at the digital voice recorder I switch on and says, "Okay, this interview is over!" Thank God he's kidding and we all laugh, me especially with a sense of relief. So I start out by saying, "This is a true story and if you haven't heard it before you'll enjoy it." Paul rocks back in his chair, glances over at Jeanne and decides to listen. "Neil Young was once asked by a music journalist to name the top ten rock guitarists of all time." Paul stares intently at me. Now I've got his attention. "So Neil thinks for a moment and says, 'it's like a ten story building and maybe I'm on the 7th floor but guys like Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page – those dudes are on the 8th and 9th floor.' But when the journalist says, 'Neil, can I assume by the absence of his name that you'd put Jimi Hendrix on the 10th floor?' Neil says, 'no man, Jimi's in another building all by himself.'" I chuckle with self-satisfaction because I like telling this story and besides it naturally segues into my next question which is, "So tell me Paul, how would you rank the rock guitar makers, the luthiers of all time?"

Paul pauses for a moment to gather his thoughts

Paul Reed Smith

then leans in and says, "No, No – Jeff Beck is on the 10th floor!" He's still back on Neil's building because it's important to him and wham, things are suddenly spiraling off into the spontaneous give and take of two people with similar interests but different views. It's a riff I always find delightful. "Neil isn't on the 7th floor anyway," Paul says, "unless he's there as a songwriter in which case he may be higher than that." Then he gradually unpacks his unique perspective which leads to his version of the ten story building. I hear names like Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt, Robert Johnson and Elvis Presley. I agree with some and disagree with others. B.B King and Little Richard and Chuck Berry are names we agree on, even if we don't agree on which specific floor they occupy, all of which prompts Jeanne to interject saying, "you two aren't really talking about the same thing." She's right.
Moments later while quickly touching upon the early country rockers around the L.A. scene like the Byrds and Buffalo Springfield I suddenly blurt out, "Good God, I just realized who you look like – Roger McGuinn – you know, Turn, Turn, Turn - Eight Miles High and all that." Paul immediately counters, "Nah, people say I either look like Peter Frampton or Weird Al Yankovich." Laughter erupts. I can't believe it. "Weird Al?" I gasp, "no way. Frampton maybe, or I can even see Michael Caine the actor in a stretch but not Weird Al." But Paul's rolling with the Weird Al thing, "I'm telling you," he continues, "a guy came up to me just last week on the street and said, 'hey Weird Al, I caught your show two days ago.'" Another charge of laughter goes off in the room.

The good natured ribbing meanders around until we're arguing over a late 60's T.V talk show during which the host said to a guest named Jimi Hendrix, "so tell me, how does it feel to be the world's greatest guitarist?" I recall Jimi saying, "I wouldn't know, you need to ask Roy Buchanan." Paul's version of this is that Jimi said, "I wouldn't know, you need to ask Rory Gallagher." So back and forth we go, Roy Buchanan – Rory Gallagher – Roy Buchanan – Rory Gallagher, and as our voices rise in volume with each retort it occurs to me that maybe I'm pushing things a wee bit too far here. I mean like, I just met this guy and I'm a guest in his office and this IS after all THE Paul Reed Smith! And besides all that, are those footsteps of security guards I hear careening down the hallway? Are they bearing down like a sworn in posse to haul me out of Paul's office? Who tipped them off? Of course! Sonuva……. it could've only been Paul or Jeanne. One of them must have pressed a hidden button under this table? Treachery abounds.

"Never mind Gallagher and Buchanan," he says in mock exasperation, "That was then, this is now. And in

the here and now the best guitarist breathing is Derek Trucks." Ah hah, he's talking about electric blues slide guitarists I conclude and then before I can throttle back my impulses I'm leaning in pointing and saying perhaps a bit too loudly, "No way man, Trucks is good, he's damn good, but he's no Sonny Landreth." But Paul's having none of it, "Derek Trucks, period, end of story," he says with steel in his voice. So back and forth we go again: Derek Trucks – Sonny Landreth – Dereck Trucks – Sonny Landreth. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I'm going off the rails again. Why am I being so argumentative, so provocative? Dear God, forgive me, but I love this – this iron on steel thing of one man sharpening another and how it causes the fiery sparks of what someone once called constructive conflict. It's good strong stuff.

But - uh oh! Paul is up on his feet moving toward a land line phone. Is that a stare or is that a glare? I've finally done it – he's calling security. I knew it. No wait! He's thrashing around in what I thought was a state of agitation but maybe it's visceral excitement because now he's hunched over his computer. He's stabbing frantically at the keyboard and sliding his mouse around and then suddenly – BOOM – a super-sonic wall of sound rocks the room. You guessed right, its Derek Trucks tearing it up on a bluesy riff. Fiery sparks and billowing smoke pour from Paul's monitor; that's how righteously hot Truck's playing comes through the ether. Okay - okay, maybe it wasn't actual set off the fire alarm kind of smoke, but it sure seemed like it because I swear to God Derek was burning the place down!

Alright... maybe, just maybe Trucks is better than Landreth, but I'm not admitting that to Paul Reed Smith thank you very much. After all, he said Neil wasn't on the 7th floor – didn't he? Damn right, I heard him and I've been a big Neil fan since the unheeded days of my wasted youth when I was slammin' gears in a 67 VW Beetle between Cumberland, Md. and College Park playing a boot legged version of Cinnamon Girl on a bulky 8 track tape machine slung beneath the dashboard. Paul leans back in his chair and for a moment his eyes close and his head starts bobbing and that big grin is spreading across his face again. In fact everyone is smiling and nodding. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds of smokin' hot electric blues rock riffs fill every nook and cranny of the room until Paul re-enters the here and now. He bolts upright in his chair, punches a key and just like that the music stops.

He glances at his watch, then over at Jeanne; he looks at me, then back to Jeanne and now once more at his watch. Everyone is on their feet and I hear something about them being late for Paul's next appointment. I'm shaking hands around the table and heading for the door when I hear Paul say, "That was unusual. It was different but I enjoyed it. I don't know if you got anything there you can use for an article, but that....yeah that was different."

Downstairs I thank Jeanne for making it all happen and again shake hands good-by. Walking out I steal a last fleeting glimpse around the lobby at the big colorful posters of Santana as well as some of the lesser guitar gods. On the drive home I glance over at my unused list of interview questions lying on the passenger's seat. Then, half laughing and half cringing I think back to the point in the interview when I actually likened Paul's self-described visual retention and photographic memory abilities to those of an autistic savant! Did I really do that? I shake my head at yet another example of my over the top hyperbolically absurd humor which was thankfully insufficient cause for my removal.

Still, I'm glad I didn't do down that worn road of structured questions leading to a conventional narrative in the service of one more "been there - seen that" kind of article. A peerless subject like PRS deserves a novel approach, or at least a valiant attempt at one. I'm not sure if Paul feels the same but I suspect and hope he does. I think he gets it. (Hell, at least he never called security on me.) After all, he built a successful life and career challenging the orthodoxy. He's a disrupter of prevailing wisdom and a challenger of all the old assumptions. He respects tradition and

MACCHINE MARSILI
START
STOP
STEP

Paul Reed Smith

Paul Reed Smith

understands the weight of history, but refuses to be hemmed in by it all. Besides, about 240 employees are grateful that he's cut from that rare cloth. And so am I.

For some reason another quote from Neil Young glides through my mind:

"It was back in Blind River in 1962
When I last saw you alive."

I lose the thread when my cell phone goes off. I decide to ignore it and let it ring. Out of some lost place where memories gather I dredge up an old line from Hunter S. Thompson about swooping bats and Barstow which sets me to laughing out loud. The phone stops ringing and when it does the song returns:

"Long may you run
Long may you run.
Although these changes have come.
With your chrome heart shining
In the sun
Long may you run."

I decide that Neil was singing about PRS, the keeper of the flame to whom the electric torch has been passed. Rickenbacker, Gibson, Fender –God Bless em but those guys are all gone now. Yet there's one still among us for whom this gig remains the ultimate, intensely personal double dog dare. And based upon my personal encounter today, the fire has not been extinguished, not by a long shot. He's still delivering blows against the empire.

And now there's nothing left to argue about. Paul Reed Smith – Long May You Run.

Note: To help kick off their 30th Anniversary Celebration PRS Guitars will re-introduce public tours of their Stevensville, Md. facilities. For more information, contact PRS Guitars at:
410 – 643 – 9970
custserv@prsguitars.com

Joe Knaggs

The Knaggs Mating Dance

By Joe Knaggs

One of the nicest guitars I've built in my 30-year career was Creation Series #5 (Serial # 186), a beautiful Choptank custom-made for my good friend Dr. Chujo. The instrument was a wonderful collaboration between a guitar lover and a guitar maker, along with the talented group of luthiers and inlay artists I have the pleasure of working with daily. Dr. Chujo has admired my work over the years and acted as an inspiration not only for this instrument, but also for a first-of-its-kind Choptank "T." As an artist and luthier, I can say that it is the admiration of others that boosts us to new levels. Dr. Chujo's passion for super-high-end instruments has certainly ignited that flame.

The Creation Series Program: You may be familiar with my past history of designing and building high-end instruments. My career as a luthier began 30 years ago with PRS guitars. I came from a finishing shop where we applied finishes on everything you could think of. We finished everything from furniture for the White House to duct work in hospital air-conditioning systems. I started with PRS guitars managing the finishing area, quickly became the production manager for the shop, became the prototype/artist guitar maker, started and grew the Private Stock department to $3 million–plus in backorders and eventually became director of R&D, where I designed many models as well as headed off new product development meetings and decisions. I started my own business along with Peter Wolf and Danny Dedo in 2009. In addition to the many tasks required to start a business, I wanted to take my prior experience and passion to another level by creating one-off pieces that come from the heart—truly unique pieces never to be reproduced. I want an instrument buyer to feel 100 percent confident in each guitar's

Joe Knaggs

uniqueness. Along with this confidence, the customer can also have a major part in the design theme if he or she so chooses. This particular build is a great example of how that theory can unfold.

The Conception: The Choptank began with a series of photos Dr. Chujo had given to our counterparts at Ishibashi Music in Japan. Peter and I had talked with Ishibashi about the Creation Series while visiting Tokyo and working the Yokohama trade show. Dr. Chujo was very familiar with the guitars I had made in the past and owned quite a few pieces I had made while working with PRS. He gave Ishibashi a series of photographs to be used as the design basis for the instrument. In typical Japanese style, no stone was left unturned—there were photos of every angle. The photos were of beautiful Japanese cranes. Dr. Chujo politely asked Ishibashi to get my take on the photos. I was instantly drawn to the colors—beautiful blues, grays, off-whites and a little spot of red. I could see the possibility in the design right away. So I got back to them, gave it my thumbs up and we began the process.

The Wood: The first matter was to pick a top and a neck blank. I had a small stash of killer East Coast maple that Brad Hill had given me. As it happens, a lot of these pieces come from the same area I go camping in West Virginia. We needed a clean, white piece of wood that we could use to bring out the blues. If the piece of wood is brownish, it makes it difficult to get bluer hues. Dr.Chujo asked me to use my best judgment in picking the top. I felt that a curly piece would work better than a "quilt" maple top. We went through the supply and picked a deep, medium-size curl—a really intense piece. I felt that the colors would work best with a nice light, one-piece Swamp Ash back.

The Neck: A ridiculous curly rock maple blank

was the choice for the neck, and again I looked for a whiter piece to allow different color options. The fingerboard was still a mystery because we needed to get an inlay design going. I originally thought about Cocobolo, but that changed later. With the woods picked and the specifications laid out, I began the concept of the inlay.

Jaime Aulson and I are good friends, and her work has always been top-notch. I made an appointment to spend the day going over the inlay with her. It's always best to leave plenty of time to come up with new designs such as this. Jaime and I approached it with an open mind. There was only the concept of the Japanese cranes as the basis for the inlay design. We pulled up some video of these cranes to get a better idea of what they were about and how they acted in their natural settings. We found a scene of them performing a "mating dance," a beautiful series of poses that they go through before the final mating. This was all being done against a background of snow—it was a wonderful backdrop to the colors that the birds naturally have. The blues, grays, black and red really stood out against the off-white background. We decided that the best way to handle the scene was to have the two birds approaching each other from the top and bottom of the fingerboard to meet in the middle at the 12th fret, where they would intertwine in a beautiful pose.

The background was a bit of a puzzle to figure out. We could go with an ebony board, which would have brought the inlays out beautifully as well, but I wanted to capture that light haze that you get on a semi-cold, early spring or late winter day. A slight fog is what it is... I came up with the idea of using a maple fingerboard because you spray finish on top of them. This allowed me to work colors into the fingerboard that would be protected under the finish. I originally thought about using a curly maple fingerboard but realized that the less grain, the better. So we decided to go with a flat-sawn rock maple fingerboard. It worked like a charm—I was able to slightly stain and tone it to match the hue that was naturally in the scene.
I decided to use an ebony boarder instead of adding

shell purfling or BWB purfling because I did not want to take away from the scene, and also wanted it to represent Japanese art. They use modest borders that only frame the scene rather than try to enhance it. We used a beautiful piece of curly maple as the headstock overlay to tie the headstock into the body.

The Body: The body is our Choptank. We decided to use the single-purf option to split the top and allow us to stain it in two different colors. This "purfling in the top" concept was something I came up with while lying in bed fighting cancer. We had been putting the laminates on the tops of the guitars, which allowed us to have a "two guitars in one" look. I felt there must be a way of using the top that existed and splitting the top to achieve the same look we had with the laminates, without covering up the top. I sketched my idea. I went over the idea with Danny, and he masterfully programmed the concept. We did this on the first Creation Series guitar, "The Black Pearl." This process worked well and has allowed us to come up with innovative color schemes that people have not seen before, and it has become a hallmark of our business.

The Pickguard: It was a given that we wanted to use a maple pickguard. We went over many ideas, which included inlaying shell purfling, BWB purfling and others, but we eventually decided less was more. We put ebony around the outside of the pickguard to carry the theme of the fingerboard and headstock overlay. This also allowed us to make the pickguard look like it was a part of the fingerboard and tone it accordingly. The pickguard has a very 3D look because of this.

The Build, Finish and Assembly: We built the guitar as we normally do. The finish is where

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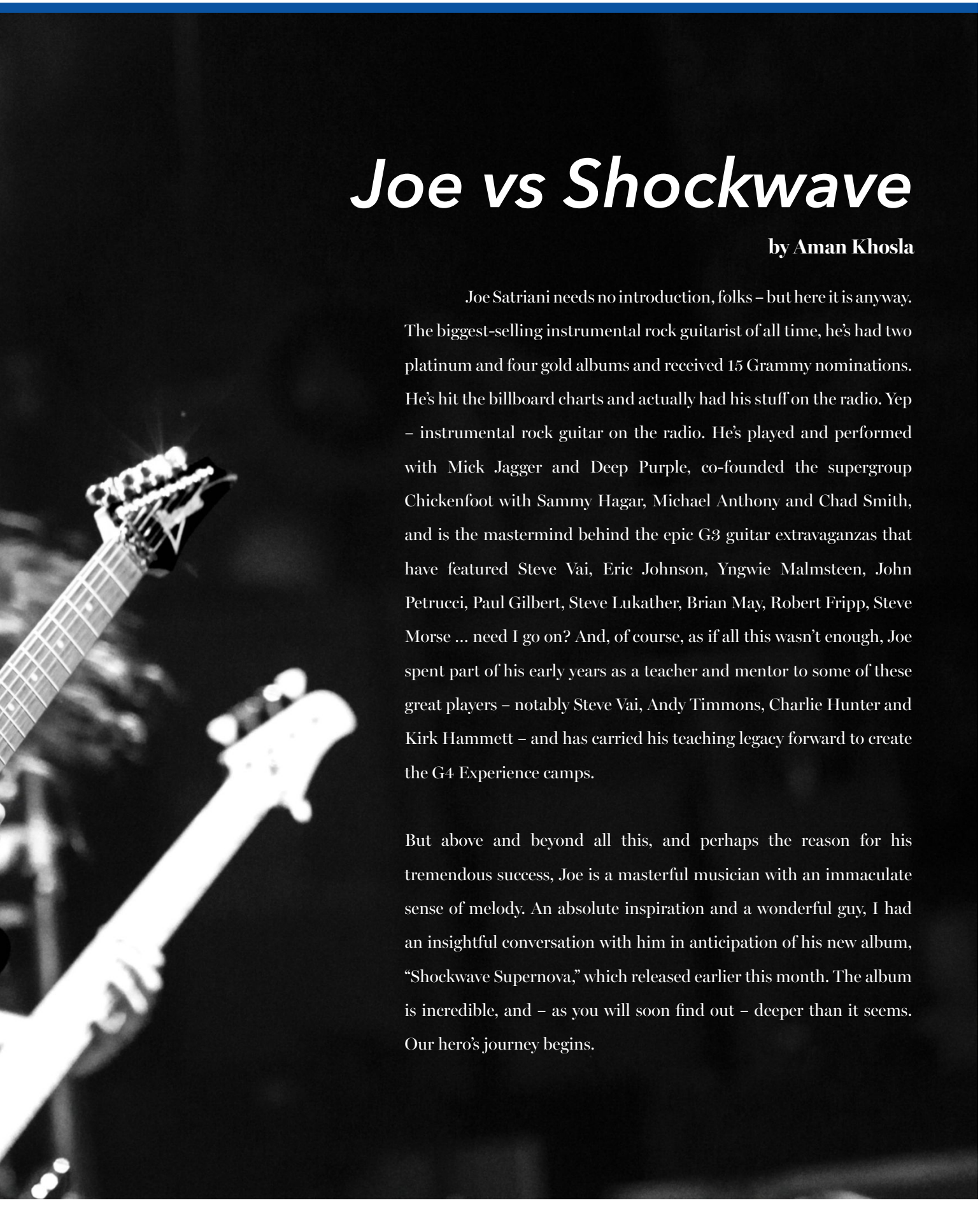
I had to come up with a scheme that would not take away from the beautiful inlays, and most importantly maintain the minimalist/ Japanese theme. I decided to go with a subtle "grayish blue" to support the inlays. I wanted the curl to jump, so I stained the maple with a darker blue/black mix. I sanded this out and stained the rest with a slight blue color, enhancing the upper part a bit more so there were two different sections. We finished the guitar as we normally do to a super-high gloss, carefully prepared the fingerboard so as to not "burn through" the color, and assembled the instrument. We got a special Creation Series case made and shipped the guitar to Tokyo. Ishibashi used the guitar for some tradeshow events along with magazine articles. Then Dr. Chujo received the guitar, and the rest is history!

Joe Satriani



Joe vs Shockwave

by Aman Khosla

Joe Satriani needs no introduction, folks – but here it is anyway. The biggest-selling instrumental rock guitarist of all time, he's had two platinum and four gold albums and received 15 Grammy nominations. He's hit the billboard charts and actually had his stuff on the radio. Yep – instrumental rock guitar on the radio. He's played and performed with Mick Jagger and Deep Purple, co-founded the supergroup Chickenfoot with Sammy Hagar, Michael Anthony and Chad Smith, and is the mastermind behind the epic G3 guitar extravaganzas that have featured Steve Vai, Eric Johnson, Yngwie Malmsteen, John Petrucci, Paul Gilbert, Steve Lukather, Brian May, Robert Fripp, Steve Morse ... need I go on? And, of course, as if all this wasn't enough, Joe spent part of his early years as a teacher and mentor to some of these great players – notably Steve Vai, Andy Timmons, Charlie Hunter and Kirk Hammett – and has carried his teaching legacy forward to create the G4 Experience camps.

But above and beyond all this, and perhaps the reason for his tremendous success, Joe is a masterful musician with an immaculate sense of melody. An absolute inspiration and a wonderful guy, I had an insightful conversation with him in anticipation of his new album, "Shockwave Supernova," which released earlier this month. The album is incredible, and – as you will soon find out – deeper than it seems. Our hero's journey begins.

Joe Satriani

Guitar Connoisseur: I heard the album a couple days ago, and I loved it. It's retained the "Satch" vibe that you have, and yet feels so fresh and alive. On that note – has the reason you make music evolved over the years? Do you still feel the same about creating and making music?

Joe Satriani: Yeah, it's kind of unexplainable. I have this urge when I get up everyday to write new music – to pull something out of me that needs explaining in a musical way and well, (laughs) I can't even explain that! I'm just trying to figure out what's going on in the world. What's going on with me? What's happened to me? What am I dreaming about? What am I wishing for? The way that I express that is with melody and harmony and rhythms, and the instruments that allow me to do that best are the guitar, the keyboard and the bass – so that's what I do. I don't really ask questions about it; I just blindly go ahead and write whatever comes. Afterwards, I sit back and see what I've done and try to pull it all together so that it's cohesive for the audience.

GC: I suppose that's the purest form of inspiration there is, and you're not questioning or digging into it – you're just letting it be. I just talked to Steve Vai a couple of months ago, and it's a similar sort of thing that we were chatting about – the source of inspiration. He mentioned a Bob Dylan interview he said he'd heard where people kept trying to ask him where his songs came from, and he kept saying, "I don't know, they just come out!" In terms of the thought process that goes behind the inspiration, whether you've been stuck with it or you've chosen it, you've had this whole "science fiction" theme going on for a while. Are you tied into the meaning and the stories related to it, and that's what inspires you? Or are they more like conceptual afterthoughts after you've gone in cold and made the music?

JS: Well, I think there's been a lot of funny happenstance, like with anybody else's life, you know? Sometimes things happen, and you scratch your head thinking, "Wow, that's really funny that that happened to me again." Just like the other day, somebody here at the camp was remarking about how I came out with the Silver Surfer on an album cover and then years later lost my hair and started shaving my head (laughs) – some sort of poetic justice or something! So I explained to him how it was purely by accident that we wound up with "Surfing With the Alien" as the title of the record, and then again, simply by coincidence that somebody at the record company was a fan of the Silver Surfer and knew somebody at Marvel and so on. So, before you know it, without my planning any of it, I've got this image tied in. But, you know, I have to say, I was into science as a kid, and I've always felt that the term "science fiction" really doesn't do it justice. It makes people suspect science. To me, it was pretty plain very early on that we live on a spinning ball that's part of a solar system, and we're in a galaxy that's part of this thing that we call the universe. Diving deeper into this stuff is more like waking up and seeing reality for what it really is, so every time that I would dip into that, it seemed to me like I was being more open – I wasn't trying to be "spacey" or unusual or extra-scientific or something like that. It is actually just the reality of the world, and all you need to do is look around. NASA has a really great Google+ feed that gets updated everyday, and you can check it out to see what's going on. There are people in space right now as we speak, there are people preparing to go into space, there are pictures of our planet floating in space – I can't imagine how people would think that's unnatural, unusual or somehow connected to science fiction. It's absolute reality, you know? So anyway, besides that – if you look at the titles of the songs on this record, very few, if any, refer to that science fiction, in any case. The title track is really just a silly name concocted by an alter ego to try and make something of himself. (laughs)

GC: (laughs) Well, I just thought it was interesting, because the thing that is reminiscent of it on this record is the thematic continuity in the sense that, well – it starts with "Hello" and ends with "Goodbye," and I didn't know if there was a deeper arc or journey – a sense of story to it.

JS: You're absolutely right, though. See, I made the realization that the real Joe is shy and retiring and doesn't seek out crowds, but I just happen to have this job where I seek out crowds. (laughs) So after I take a deep breath and get the courage to walk on stage, somebody else takes over. And I was having this thought process: "What if that was a real alter ego?" Let's say – as if I were making a movie in my head about this crazy alter ego that just gains power – and that leads to an internal struggle in the performer's head. Sort of like "Joe vs. His Alter Ego." And,

of course, this guy calls himself "Shockwave Supernova," which is a silly name but – why wouldn't he, you know? It's merely to draw attention to himself. So I felt that it would be interesting if there's a struggle, and eventually the real artist convinces the alter ego that he has to evolve into something better. He has to stop playing with his teeth and doing all sorts of show-biz stuff and concentrate more on the music. The movie (album) would then be about Shockwave going through all of his memories of all the things that he did, and then coming to the realization towards the end of the record that "Okay, Joe is right – I've got to evolve into something better." I put that theme into the songs and especially as you get towards the end of the record – in my mind, anyway – he really starts to fall apart and then rebuilds himself during the breakdown section of the last song. And, finally, he gets the courage to stand up and become something better. I left that unanswered – what does he become? Does he vanish? Do they merge into one? Is he going to turn into something else? I don't know about that – I thought it was nice to leave that open as a question.

GC: That sounds incredible. I like the fact that you left it open-ended because I feel that's part of the beauty of putting out work like this. You're expressing a thought and the music is there, and then there's this deeper journey to it – if you're interested. And even deeper beyond that, there are these questions – if you're interested.

JS: Yeah, yeah.

GC: You know, it's funny that you mention this "shy side of Joe Satriani" – I know that's something that's been quite an important part of your persona over the years. How do you, as that entity, deal with the way that one interfaces with fans these days? It's turning into much more of an interactive thing where people are connecting with artists on a deeper level and they want to know more of the "everyday" – Twitter and Facebook and the like all play into it pretty strongly, too. Does that figure into your life at all? Does it bother you, or do you play to it?

JS: Funnily enough – I have really benefited from the birth of social media on the Internet because of the kind of music that we do. There aren't a lot of doors open to us in the media that, let's say, a young pop artist would have. They get TV and movies and that kind of stuff. Instrumental rock guitar? (laughs) That's a sub-genre, you know? So when the Internet revolution happened, it was a wonderful thing because it allowed us to talk directly to fans everywhere around the world at exactly the same moment. Certainly playing into my natural state of not wanting to be in front of crowds all the time, communicating with millions of people through the laptop was also a lot more appealing (laughs). We've used the social media to create our own community, and I actually really like that because you get direct feedback from the fans that's not filtered through anybody else's angle on any particular story or release. It's simply been what I would call an additive thing. In other words, it's really added to the experience of moving the music around, and since I'm a live performer and I get a charge out of just being on stage and being in the moment, crowds withstanding (laughs) – social media has opened up the world of touring for us, too. When I started out – I remember telling people and it was hard for them to believe – when "Surfing With the Alien" was hanging out high on the charts at top 40 for a very long time, my first European tour consisted of four shows – entirely. And one of them was an unannounced add-on because we had nothing to do and somebody canceled! That's a direct explanation as to how we weren't trusted in the entertainment world. Now, this is pre-Internet, so it was all based on what people were reading in magazines or what they heard on the radio – it really wasn't what the fans were saying. They didn't have so much of a voice back then. And now it's completely different. We could literally stay on tour every day of the year and just keep circling the globe because the Internet has brought me close to all of them around the world. The Internet destroyed and built at the same time (laughs). So, on the positive side, it did, in a

Joe Satriani

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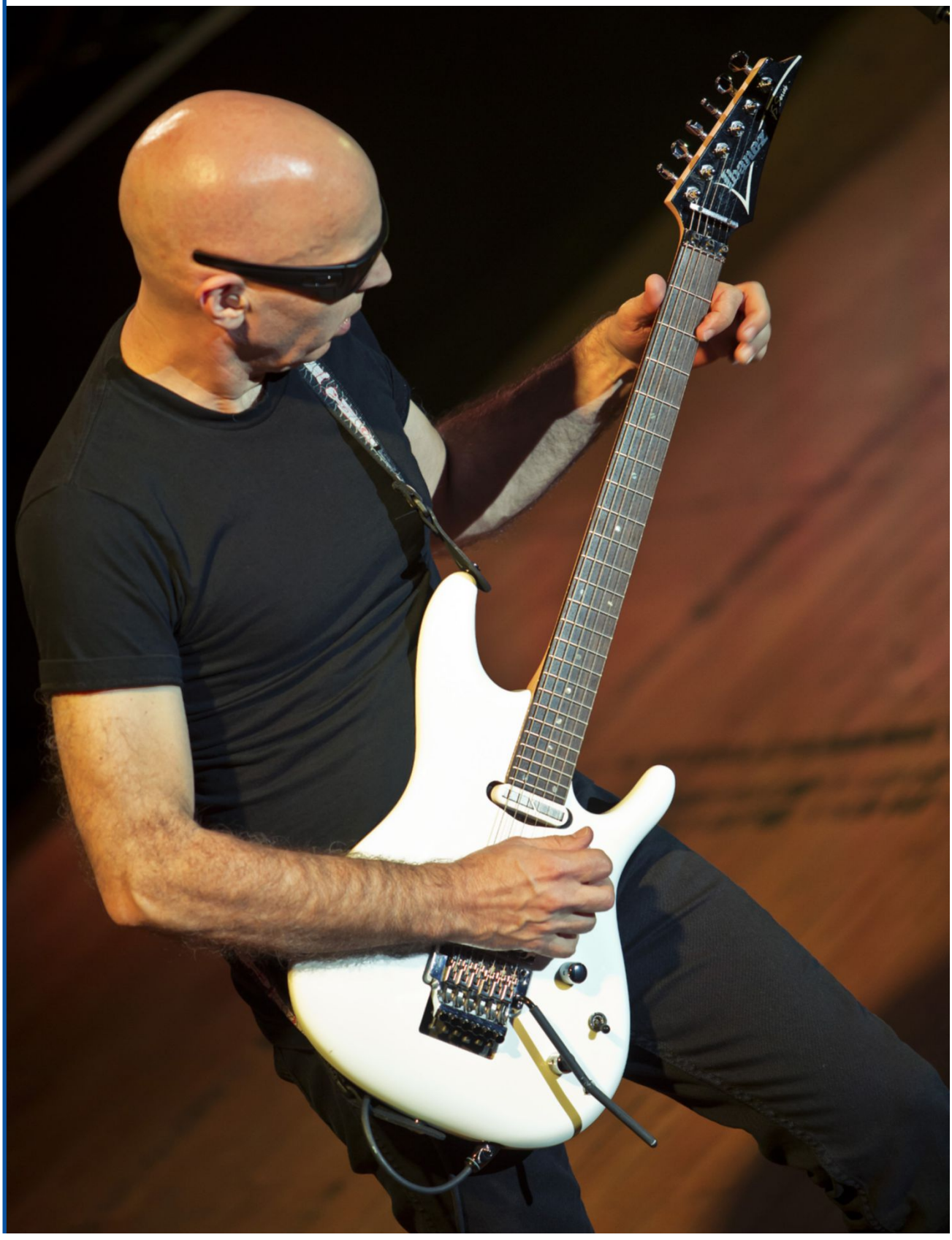
Joe Satriani



very backwards way, help expand my audience and make it easier for me to deal with, in terms of that shyness.

GC: That's so great to hear. It seems to me that, actually, if you put aside the shock of the sudden changes the Internet has brought about, I think it's a really positive evolution for the industry. There're just certain things that we need to get on board with, but other than that it seems to have done so much good for music, objectively, as a whole. Talking about connecting with your fans, by the way – my dad is a huge fan, and I think he just wanted me to tell you that!

JS: That's great! Well, tell him "Thank you!"

GC: (laughs) Well, you know, that got me thinking – your music appeals to such a wide demographic. There are kids and then there are older people, and then – girls are listening to instrumental guitar now, how'd you manage that? (laughs) Have you ever tried to identify what it is that people connect with in your music, or is that a stone best left unturned?

JS: (laughs) Good question! Well, I think I've asked that question of other composers and artists. The stone is certainly left unturned when it comes to myself – that kind of introspection, to me, is somewhat narcissistic. I think it would ruin it all, somehow. It would jinx it if I thought I could analyze myself and come up with a bunch of rules and guidelines to continue down my path. But, as a student of music – of course. I had a great music teacher where I went to school at Carle Place High School in Long Island. His name was Bill Wescott, and he taught me the history of music, along with music theory in those few years, and I looked at the works of the contemporary and classical composers with those questions in mind. What is it that makes people still want to hear "Moonlight Sonata"? What is it about Beethoven that infuriates some and puts a smile on others? Why do some people prefer Brahms over Wagner? It's very interesting – as students of music, you go in and you analyze, and as lovers of music, you just turn that part of your brain off and you listen, and you try to feel the composer's emotion behind the piece. So, I always identified with that and thought that there was more voodoo to it than science, and there's no way to predict what we, as people, are going to respond to. So much of it is what's happening in our hearts and in our minds when we hear that piece of music. Having said all that, I do approach it in the way that we should always look at our melodies and make them as strong as possible – edit them down to their barest possible components. If there's anything I learned, from studying great composers, it's that. That's what they did. They just had this thing about economy that allowed them to hit an unbelievable sweet spot with the melody, and that would make every song so different because that editing process means that they're just whittling it all the way down to "this song is about the color green and no other color," you know? (laughs) And that leaves all the other colors for all the other songs! For instance, just an analogy that I'm using, if I would write a song called "Cryin," then what am I really talking about? What's the story behind it? Don't stray – don't play any other stuff that has nothing to do with it. Even though I could impress and put a section in the song that's purely promotional, I don't – I just never do that. So, sometimes the songs come out pretty simple in the technical department, and sometimes they come out very complicated and difficult – but it's purely based on what I think is going to tell the story properly.

GC: You know, your melodies are my favorite thing. Of course, you can really play and you've innovated and done so many cool things, but I think if I were to analyze you, I would say your melodies are what grab people. Matter of fact, I've just got the melody from the opening track stuck on loop in my head.

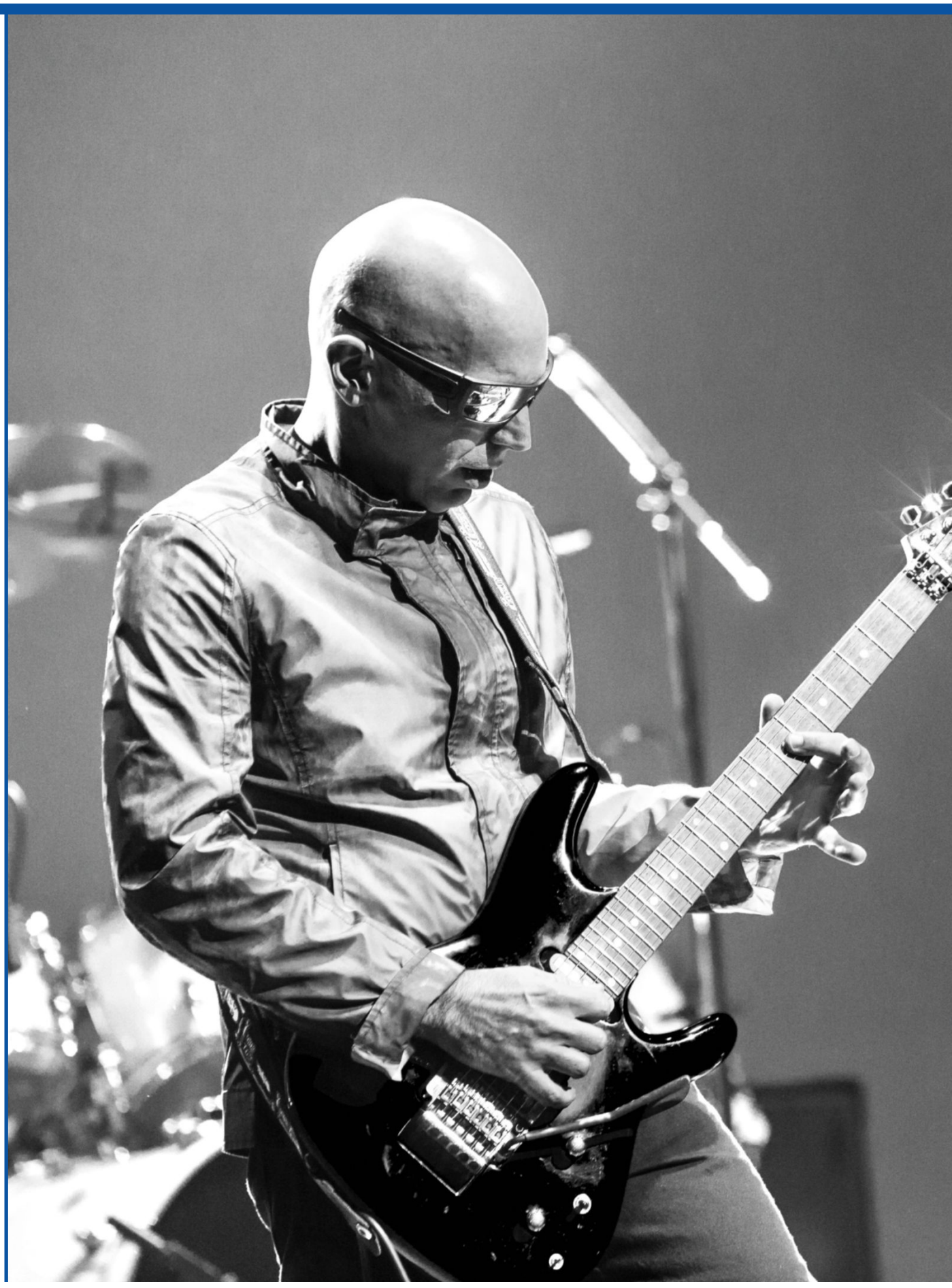
JS: Oh, great! (laughs) I'm sorry about that, but –

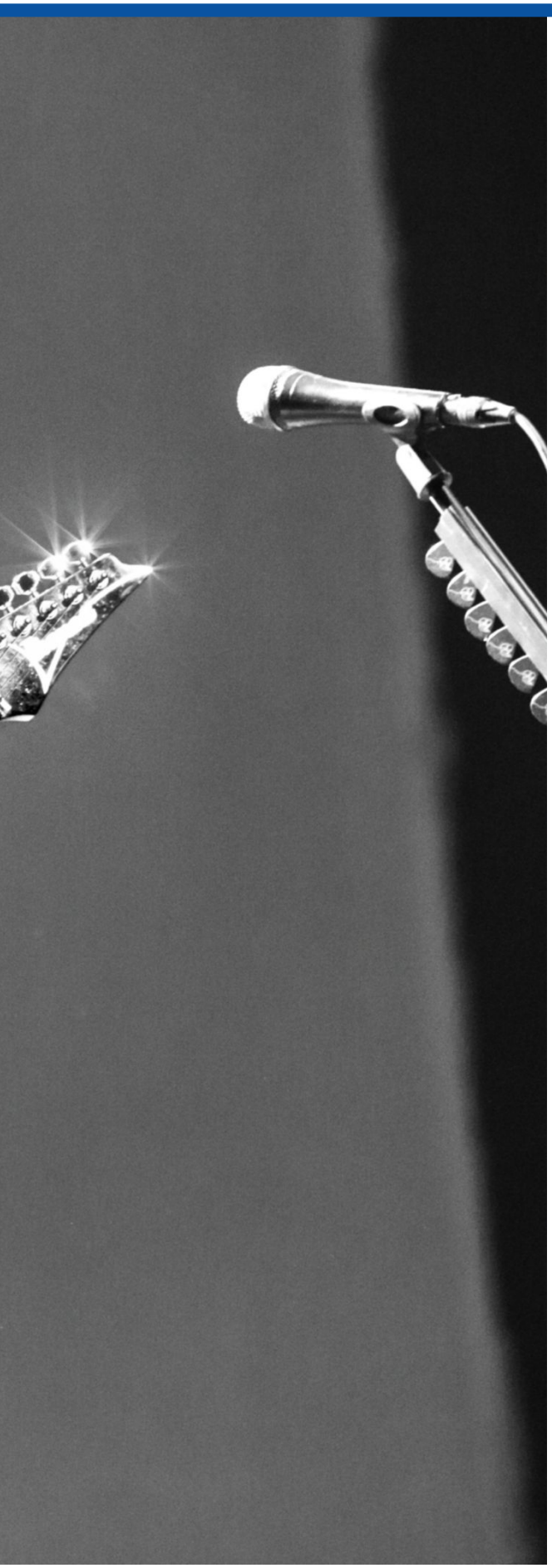
GC: Yeah, well, (laughs) you shouldn't complain about that! That's really insightful stuff, though – so if you're so true to your melodies, do they come to you? Do you just hear them in your head, or do you find them on the guitar or ...?

JS: Well, you know, they just pop into my head, I guess! They accompany a feeling or a picture, or an internal movie. I could be fantasizing about something that could never happen, or maybe I'm remembering some big event in my life. Or something very simple that just took my fancy that one moment. I remember once I was on tour – gosh, this is going back a long time ago! I was standing in an airport somewhere in Europe, waiting for bags, and I was just gripped with this sadness and foreboding. This melody is coming out, and I'm thinking, "Why would I be doing that? There's no reason for that, everything's going well." And then I realized that I was being inundated with these tones that were coming from the conveyor belts of the baggage carousel!

Joe Satriani

Joe Satriani





Machinery makes noises, right? So there's this lovely minor chord hitting me, and I just start hearing this melody that I guess just brought on that feeling. Of course, I wasn't set up for any of this and suddenly had no awareness of what was going on around me at all, and I was with a representative who turned me and said, "Are you ok?" (laughs) But that's how it is – sometimes it just comes to you!

GC: I guess that's the beauty of inspiration – it just kind of hits when it hits and you've got to eat it up, I suppose.

JS: Yes – you hold on to it. I always tell people it's sort of like a snake that's trying to get out from your grip. You've just got to hold onto it because it's going to get away eventually. Like a dream you're trying to remember, it fades – it dissolves.

GC: Well, I use my iPhone for that – it's something that's usually around, so anytime I have an idea, I just pick it up and go. You can't always capture the magic, but you can capture the notes that make you feel the magic or remind you of it, at least.

JS: Yeah, anything that works. Use your iPhone, scribble on a napkin, dial your own number and leave a message. (laughs) It's always great if you've got your guitar strapped on and you're in front of your Pro Tools, though.

GC: Somehow that never happens. (laughs) Well, not never, but – I suppose it's a question of inspiration doing its thing when you're most open to it. I always find it fascinating to hear people talk about the source of their inspiration. There are never really any "answers," per se, but there's so much to be gained from it. It's inspiring, if you will. And speaking of being inspiring, I believe you're in the middle of one of your G4 camps?

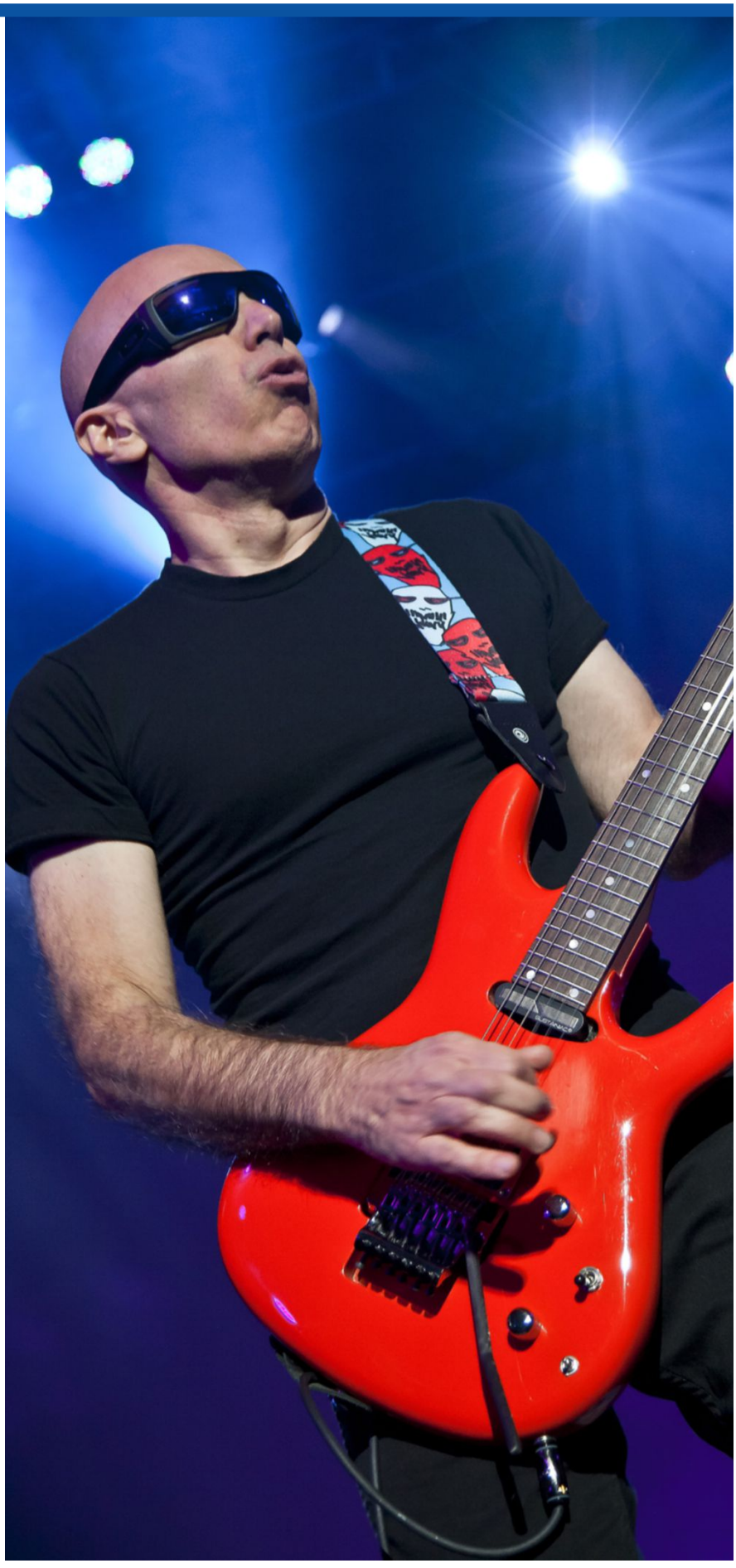
JS: Yeah – this has been really great! It's our second one – we're back at the Cambria Pines Lodge and it's a beautiful, idyllic Central California coast setting. Beautiful sunny days and rolling hills. And so, if you walk around, you hear Guthrie over here, and Tosin and Javier over there, and Mike Keneally over there in the gazebo, and Stu Hamm and Bryan Beller over there, and Marco and Matt, our drum tech and – you know what I mean? (laughs) We're all jamming early in the morning all the way up to about 1 a.m.! The vibe is really great, and every night there's a concert by one of the bands, and on the side of the stage all the other guitar payers are there just staring (laughs) because we're just loving it! We never get a chance to do this where it's such causal hang and, at the same time, because it's all guitar players, everyone's showing just everything. Everybody's an open book, and we're all learning from each other even while we're putting on these clinics for the campers, so it's really been a wonderful experience.

GC: It's pretty fantastic that you can put this kind of stuff together. The education thing is kind of taking off, don't you think? Everyone is getting into master classes and clinics and such, and I think it's pretty great. It just adds to that communal sharing of knowledge and expression and creativity.

JS: Yes, well, as the arts get somewhat clipped from school programs, it's been thrown into the private sector! I mean, that's kind of what's been happening, and I was surprised a couple of years ago when I saw these things coming up as offers. I've usually resisted clinics unless they were for some promotional purpose where they seemed to be the best fit, so when I got together with my manager and the promoter, Danny Hughes, we said if we're going to do something like this, it's got to be better than anything that's been done before. We have to create a really comfortable, friendly atmosphere, and I don't want it to be show-biz oriented. Sometimes the rock 'n' roll fantasy camps can be that way – it's a bit more of a celebrity angle. That's really not what's going to be good for the student – they need to hang out with us. They need to jam with us; they need to see us up close and telling the truth, pulling the curtain away from the wizard, and they'll get so much more out of that. And then we had to figure out a way where they would make connections

with each other. That's something that is sometimes lacking. There should be a community. There should be connections made and friendships maintained, because that's part of the artistic process – to have people to collaborate with. It's something I've always liked doing, so I wanted it to be part of the G4 experience. So I think we've been able to do that, and the location has really helped in finding that together as a group. You know – putting on a clinic is a daunting task, especially when you're providing room and board and meals and all that for 200 people! Then you invite these bands – we have Animals As Leaders, The Aristocrats and then my band, as well as Mike Keneally's solo band, and it's – well, it's a show! It's spread out over four days, but it's a show. So it's great that it's come off well, and with all this big stuff it's still very intimate. When we do our little concerts at night, there's just about enough room for 200 people to slip into the dining hall. We've got a little stage – there's no production, we've got a small PA. (laughs) The cool thing is that you can carry on a conversation with the audience almost while you're playing, and that's what it's all about – it's not only the lessons during the day and the jam sessions late at night, but it's also sort of a more open and inclusive type of live performance where campers can feel that they're really part of something. This sort of real world experience is invaluable, and you can't really describe that kind of thing on Internet lessons. One-hour lessons in a small room once a week are also a different kind of a thing. So we try to accomplish both – the one-on-one lessons, including the clinic situation, as well as the live performance and the jamming. I guess that's more like three or four things ...(laughs)

GC: Well, that's what you want, isn't it?



Combining that connection and the intimate feel with the grandiose nature of the live performances, and then have them experience what it's like on your end. It's a feat to be able to put it together, so kudos to you guys!

JS: Yeah, we're enjoying it!

GC: It must a blast with the guys you've got out there, too. Actually, the band you're playing with is fairly fresh, isn't it? Tell me a little bit about the whole changeup.

JS: I don't know – I guess I'm always looking for new ways to flesh out the music, and as I come towards the end of a touring cycle, I'm already in that phase where maybe I've written half the record. And so I start to get a feeling about what I'm writing and whether or not it's going to sit well with the band that I've just been touring with. I found myself in that situation towards the end of the "Wormhole" record, and after doing the 3D concert movie, I was thinking "Wow, I think I'm moving in some other direction." I didn't really know until just about two weeks before I got to the studio! It was pretty sudden, but I had to eventually put my foot down. It was going to be kind of disruptive to the guys I play with and am close with, but it's just something that had to be done. And, interestingly enough, I knew when I got Vinnie and Chris to come to the "Unstoppable" sessions that I wasn't going to be able to tour with them. So I just put that out of my mind, and using Marco and Bryan for the tour didn't really come up until Mike Keneally and I were doing some of the overdubs towards the end of those sessions. I just said to him, "You know what, I have no idea who's going to go on the road with us," and he brought up Marco and Bryan. That's how I got introduced to those guys. I'd known Bryan for a couple of years because he'd been playing with Steve, but I'd never actually met Marco, and that turned out to be such a fantastic moment. It turned out that we were musicians that really enjoyed playing with each other, and there was such a connection that it invigorated the whole thing. They did the tour with me, and we've been playing together since, and they're on the record.

GC: Yeah, I think it works really well – it's great how connections like that inspire

and invigorate, isn't it? Plus it must be fun to be on tour. Marco's one of the best goofballs that I know.

JS: Yes! We've always got a great sense of humor and he's an extremely creative guy – you know he's got 14 solo records out? I mean, it's insane! It's just really nice to go out with people who can play like crazy – he's such an advanced player – but he also has such a playful attitude towards music, so the doors open for everyone to try something new, and that's what keeps us laughing and excited about hitting the stage every night.

GC: That's the sweet spot. It's nice to hear that you're still invigorated night after night! I look forward to the next run of shows. Now, we've talked about a good few things, and it's been a real pleasure, Joe, but before you get back to camp, let me just ask you real quick – have you heard the new Jeff Beck record?

JS: Has it just been released?

GC: It was released maybe a couple of months ago – it's called "Live +."

JS: No, I guess I haven't! I didn't even know it came out!

GC: Yeah – they're mostly live tracks, but there're two new studio tracks at the end of the record and – boy, oh boy – that's all I'm going to say!

JS: Oh, that's great! He is one of my heroes – I've always loved watching him play live and it's amazing. If there's anybody for guitar players to look up to, Jeff Beck is one of those guys who becomes more Jeff Beck-like and better and better every year – it's just uncanny! Most people kind of fade and relax – they start to sit back in the lounge chair and enjoy their success, but Jeff just keeps innovating. He's such an inspiration and he's always fun to listen to. Always.

GC: Absolutely. Somehow it always sounds brand-spanking new – and yet he's just so strongly Jeff Beck, there's no denying it.

JS: Yes – that's so great. Well, I'll definitely take your recommendation and go listen to that!

And with that, off goes Joe Satriani to his campers for what I'm sure will be another tremendously successful G4 camp experience. But has the master of melody finally overcome his powerful alter ego? Find out for yourself this July – stay tuned.

Pickup LesLee™ The story!

by Frank Deimel

Toward the end of the last century, one could get the impression that the electric guitar had been established and developed to the fullest. This was particularly true as the appeal of the electric guitar started to wane after its meteoric rise during the golden ’50s era.

In the 1980s, MTV hit the airwaves. Keyboard and drum machine–based electronic music made its way to the top charts, dethroning the overdone/overexposed ’70s guitar rock and punk music. Guitar-related crossover inventions such as the synthaxe—and even the more developed high-tech designs such as the Bond guitar, with its first digital pickup routing system—were state-of-the-art developments that made you think that the wooden guitar was doomed.

With the ever-evolving development of technical inventions, the electric guitar and its market especially got felled not only by the natural change of trends and tastes but also by another phenomenon: the vintage market.

People quickly realized that a rock ’n’ roll item, really almost any accessory that surrounds a rock star, seemed to be a collectible bargain. That went for anything from a wadded-up tissue to a broken and thrown-into-the-audience guitar neck. The electric guitar had become a status symbol, and therefore it was almost untouchable.

Even techno music, with its European roots, could not overtake the practical as well as the sex appeal of the electric guitar.

The guitar survived the general assault of the digital world, and its value as a rock ’n’ roll icon finally propelled it to being the most successful and popular instrument in the world.

The search for enhancements, though, never ceased. The electric guitar seems to be just as experimental as any other electronic device, but compared to the development of telephones or cameras, the basic technical function has, to this day, never been changed or reinvented on a digital level to any measurable modicum of success.

Synth technology in the ’60s and ’70s never really bowled over the average player. And so there was a return to recognizable guitar sounds.

Small inventions and gadgets popped up now and then to moderate success. Gizmotron,

Frank Deimel

Sustainer/E-Bow, Sustainiac and midification devices found a niche but only as a way to enrich the mechanical guitar sound as an add-on device.

The instrument as played through effects and amplifiers already created a colorful rainbow of sounds, but certain demands of extending the guitar with onboard features seemed to be kept alive with inventions such as those mentioned above.

The guitar is easy enough to play with one hand but is held back in its expression possibilities by construction limitations such as frets and determined pickup positions. This restricts individual phrasing as a violinist might play. These technical parameters are determined during the construction and design process. It is a specific framework: You have one, two, or three pickups; a certain amount of controls and switches; and a determined playing area. That's it.

When my friend Pascal Stoffels, inventor of the Pickup LesLee™, told me about his idea in the early '90s, my ears perked up. It sounded so logical that I wondered if anyone else had thought of it too. Apparently, no one else had.

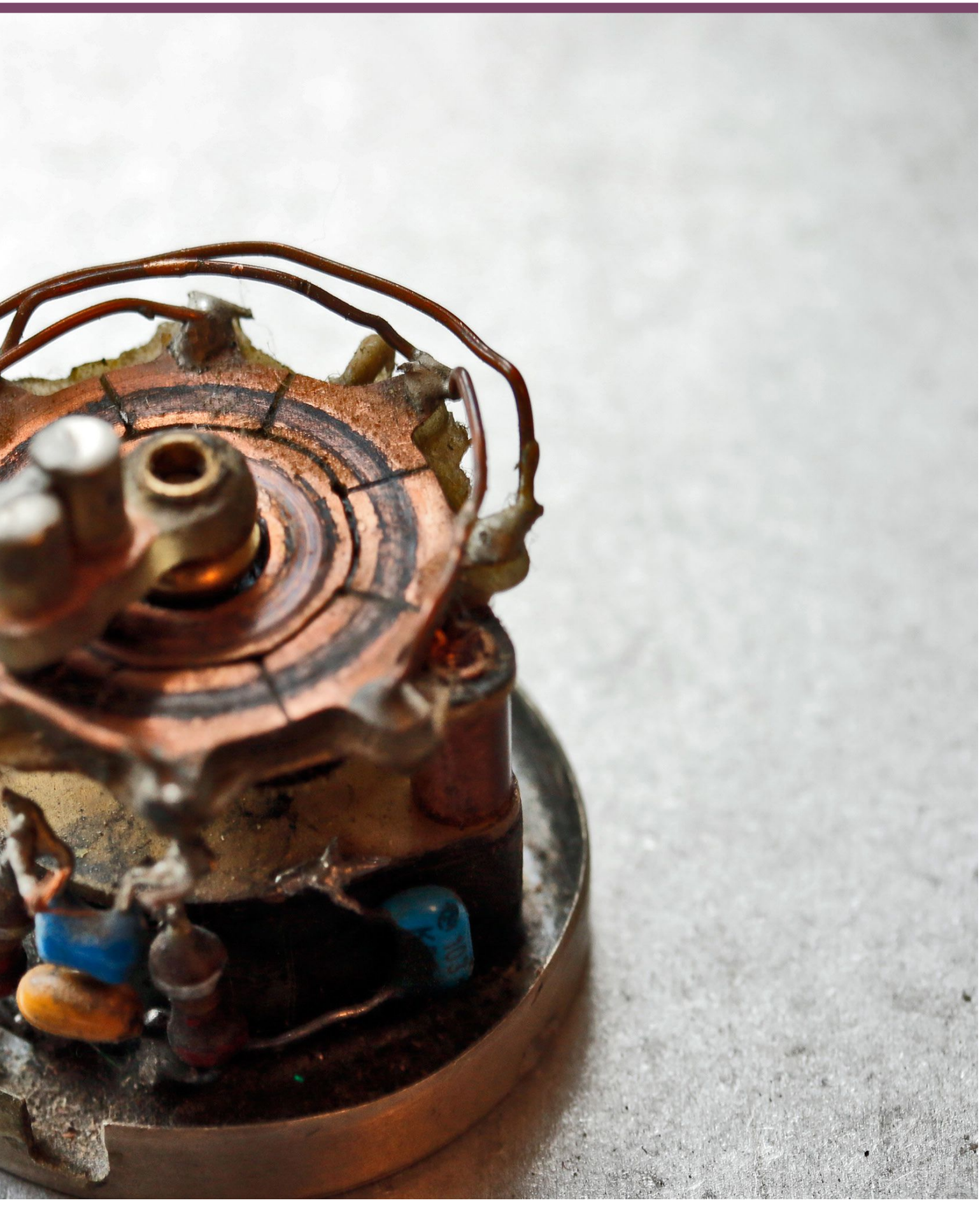
He wondered, why not "automate" the pickup selector switch? The player always has to make a choice while playing—use either the bridge or the neck pickup.

The idea was based on what had already been done by the legendary Jimi Hendrix. He had introduced a sort of wah effect on the Strat using only his onboard controls. Jimi turned down the tone knob of the neck pickup, and went switching back and forth between a bright and a dark sound by using the three-way toggle switch.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYzqWwRKCIE

As there were no five-way switches at the time, and with the natural curiosity of a player looking

Frank Deimel



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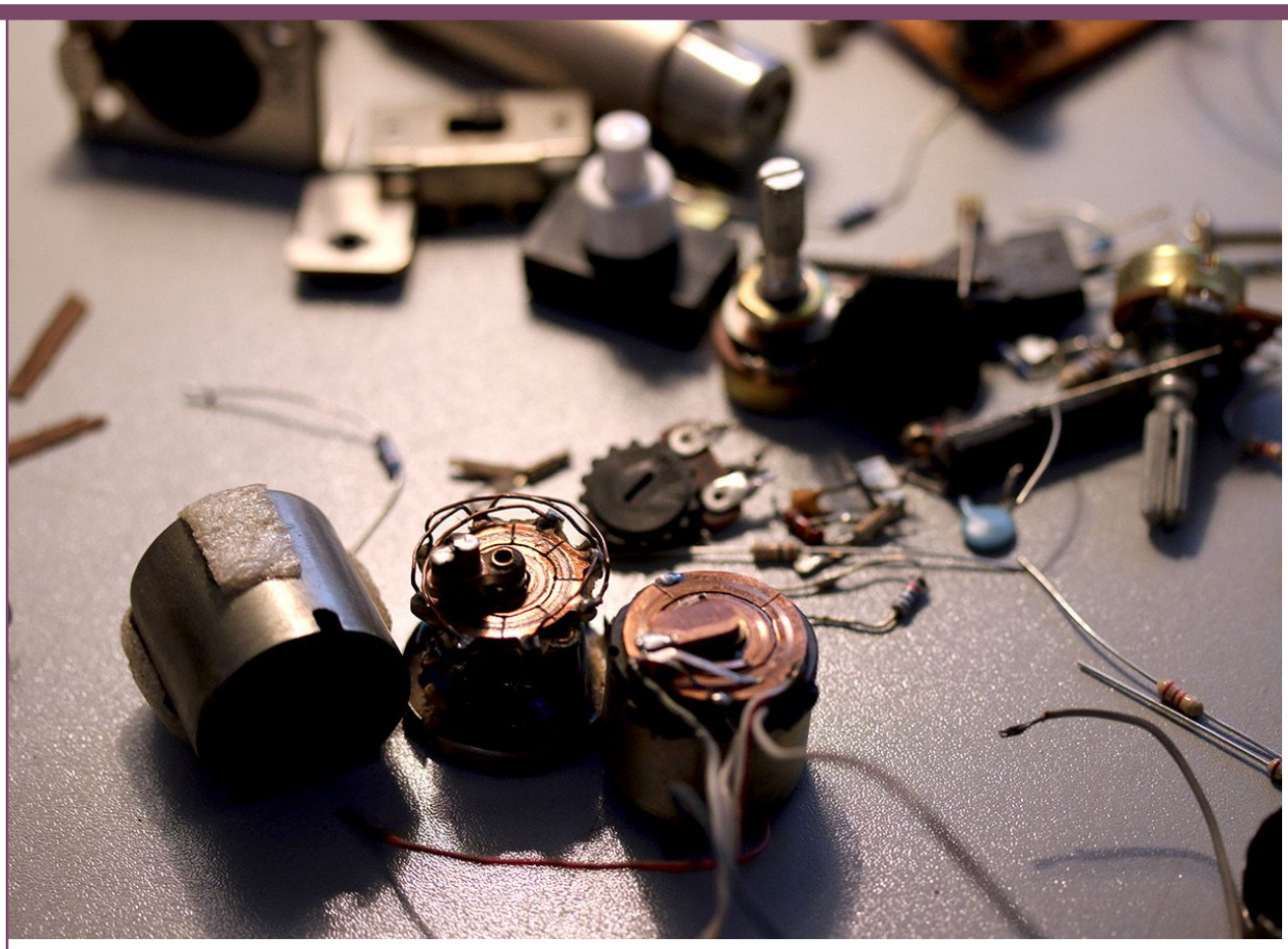

for more than the guitar might offer to inspire him, several pioneers found out pretty early that the given knobs and switches could be used in a creative context too.

I remember Brian Eno once explaining in an interview that you should creatively use the equalizer on your home high fidelity system. He recommended tailoring the settings to your taste instead of leaving all settings on zero, in order to change listening habits. He then recommended leaving these settings untouched for a while.
Anyway, it seemed to be an idea that lots of guitarists subconsciously embraced for decades.

However, they never thought of it as a permanent effect that could be switched on and off. I'm still amazed, to this day, that the idea had never been made public, as far as I know.

Here, Pascal is quoted on how he came up with the concept:

"It was during the exciting times in Berlin after the Wall came down. The partially deserted boroughs of the former East were spontaneously taken over by the first wave of diverse, young creative types. The cost of living was extremely low, so we all had plenty of time to realize our projects and live our dreams.

In this excitingly nurturing environment, I was busy making music, doing a jewelry project with cut coins and also figuring out how to build my first homemade guitar.

In the process of developing the

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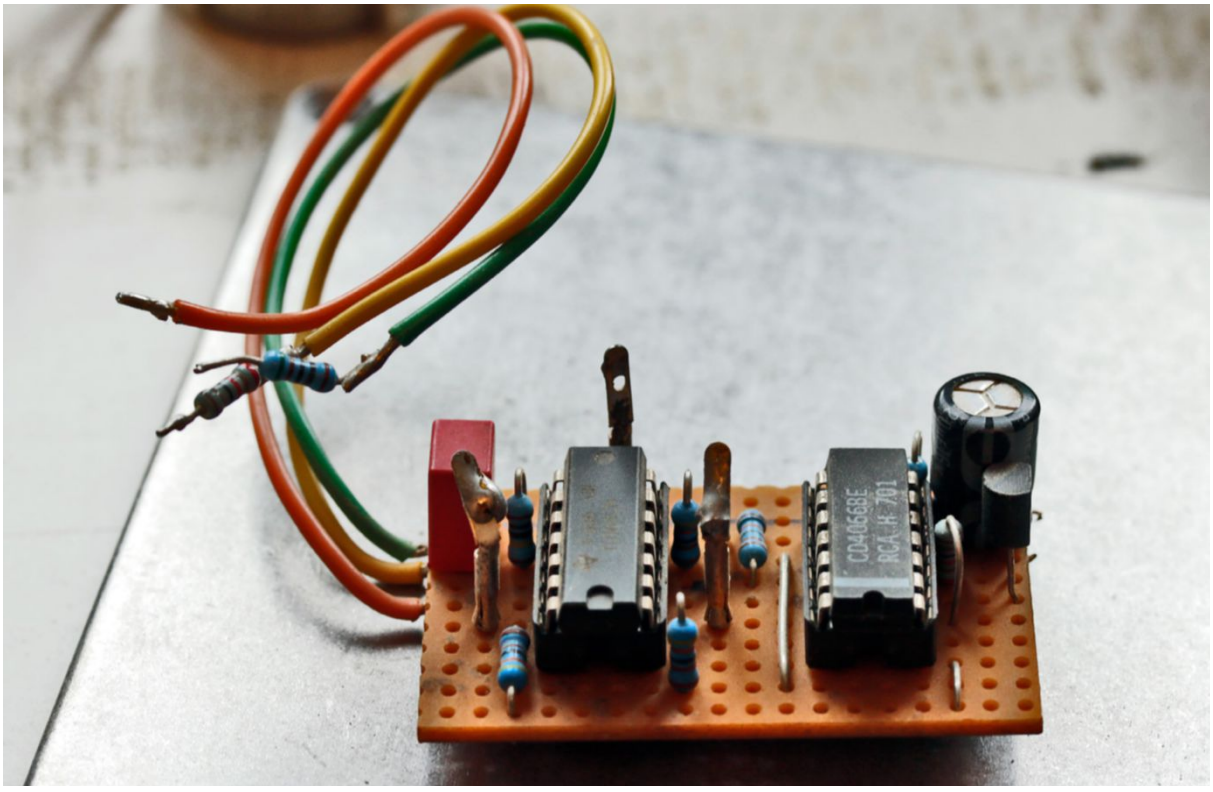

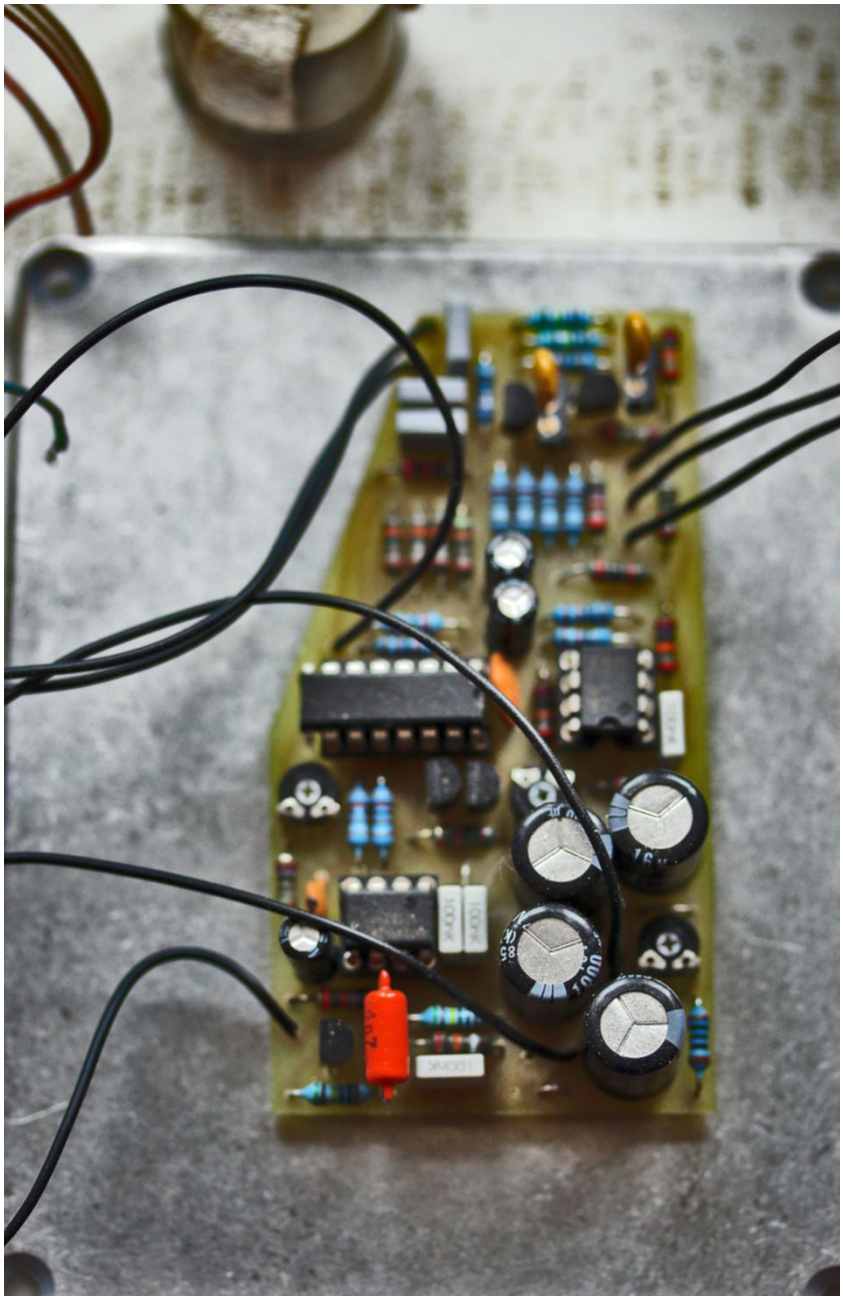

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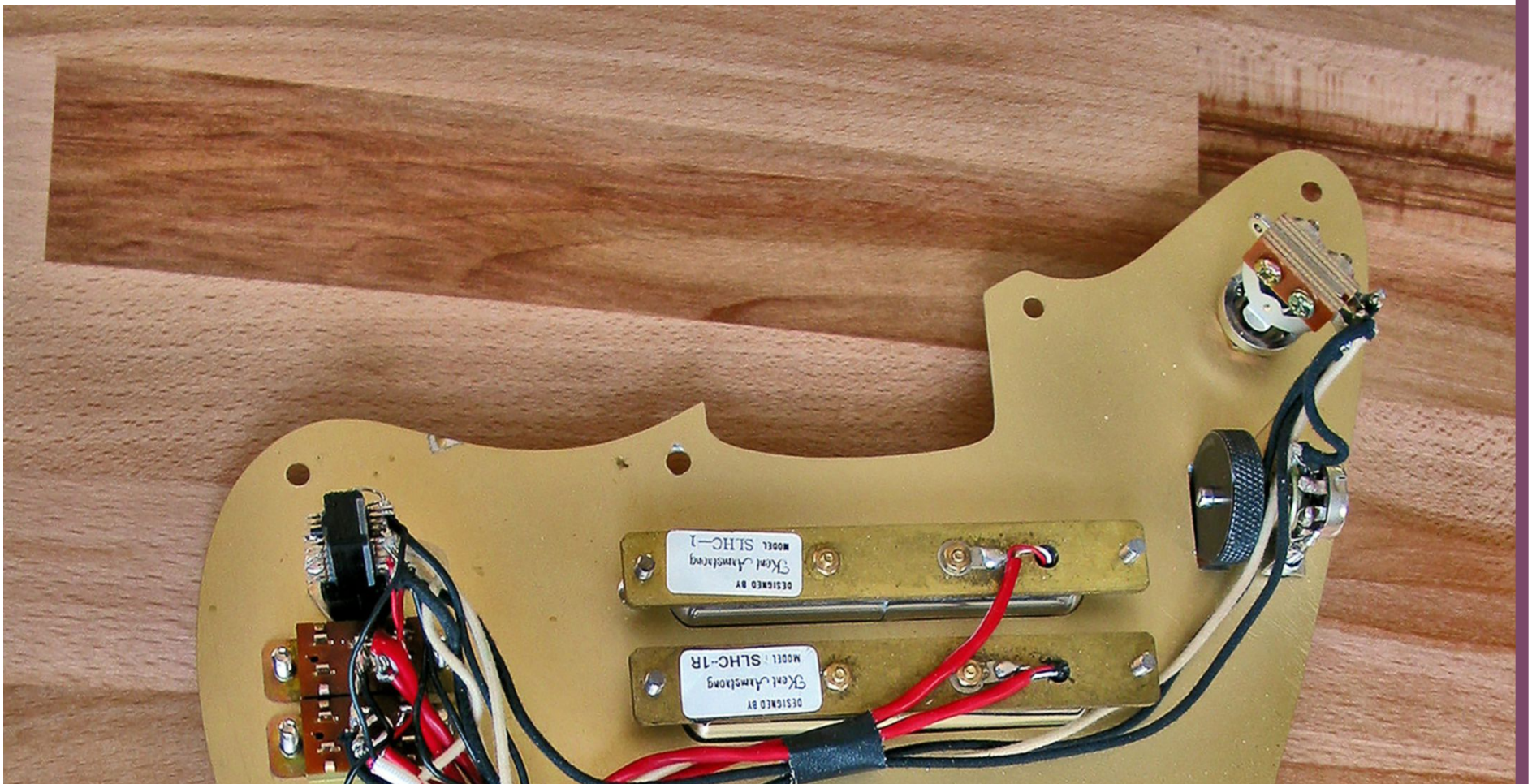
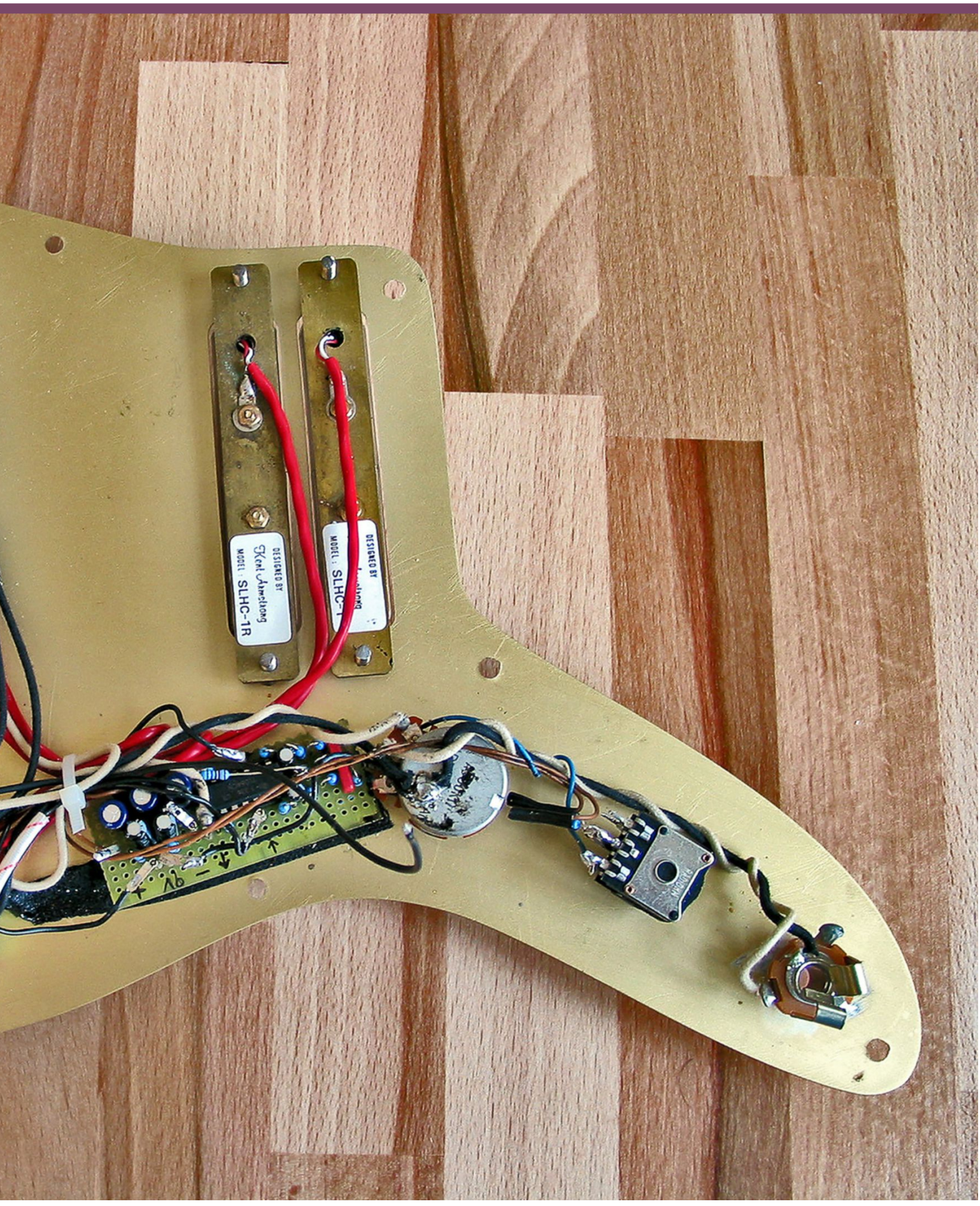



DESIGNED BY
Kent Armstrong
MODEL: SLHC-1R
DESIGNED BY
MODEL: SLHC-1

Frank Deimel

electronics for the guitar, I had an epiphany and soon found myself using my jewelry saw to cut a circular copper plate into 12 segments.

These segments formed a circular contact surface which, when touched by a rotating arm, provided the alternating pickup sequence for the first prototype of what would soon be called the PickUp 'Leslie.'

It was a motor-driven, automated pickup switch with speed control.

I encapsulated the electric motor and switch plate in a metal casing for shielding and built this unit into my homemade guitar. Since the unit needs to tap into all pickup signals to do its thing, it has to be onboard the guitar.

Right from the first prototypes, it was a nice effect to play with, giving a metronome-like timing when playing alone, serving a layer of vibrato/tremolo to single-note melodies and riffs. The hard switching also provided a very enjoyable and defined extra percussive rhythm.

Through longtime work collaboration and friendship with Frank Deimel, we have moved away from the motor-driven version to electronic switchboard versions. We now feature a custom circuit board that preserves the original idea of hard switching but cancels the pops or cracks of the switching itself.

The name 'Leslie' got altered when Lee Ranaldo from Sonic Youth bought a guitar through Deimel Guitarworks that Frank and I built in the late 1990s, a 12-string Jazzmaster type guitar with the effect on board. Lee loves the fact that we decided to call the device Pickup LesLee™ since then.

The Pickup LesLee™ is a simple effect that stays close to the nature of the electric guitar itself.

All it would take is a third hand moving the pickup selector switch up and down in the timing of the beat while playing the guitar. Any electric guitar with more than one pickup can fabricate this tonal effect by being switched continuously.

And that is exactly what is automated by Pickup LesLee™. This simplicity makes it a natural and pleasant effect."

As a matter of fact, the sound itself may resemble a tremolo device, but it definitely has a unique quality of its own.

First, the input signal being altered is fed by two different sources. As both (pickups) have different volumes and frequencies, they also produce a slight phasing while being switched against each other. As the switching itself is designed to be silent, the circuit oscillates and blends out the switch click noise. Its envelope is very soft. Once the speed pot is turned, a noticeable warm and musical texture develops, which has a truly unique character.

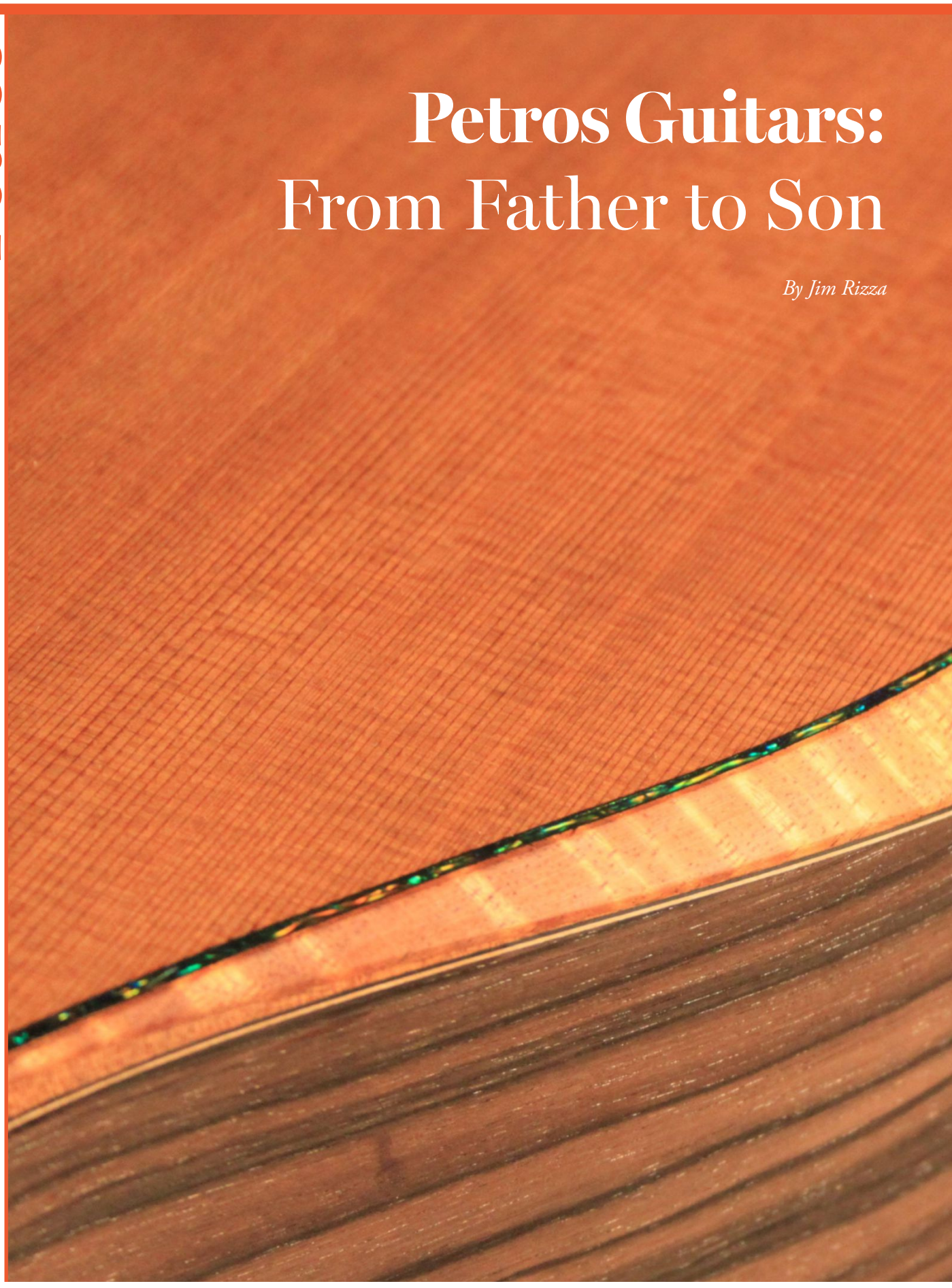
We are working on different versions at the moment to make it possible to change the envelope character as well as effect intensity. This will allow for adjustments to suit personal preferences and for use in various musical contexts.

Finally, I have worked out the most silent, and most natural-sounding, circuit with the help of Stephan Junge from Tortenmann Effects in Berlin. Our plan is to offer this unit as an onboard effect exclusively on Deimel Guitarworks Firestar guitars.

The most up-to-date version is ready to rock and will be released this summer in New York City through www.customguitarboutique.com.

Petros Guitars: From Father to Son

By Jim Rizza



Since the birth of the Akkadian oud in ancient Syria over 4,000 years ago, the quest for musical Nirvana using vibrating strings stretched over finger boards and wooden resonating chambers has been a passion for some. The very few who have succeeded in this quest have been blessed with extraordinary feel, creativity and ingenuity. Theirs are creations driven by the passion for producing those purest of tones, those throaty, resonant notes that inspire and delight, sounds that speak to the heart. From the oud, to the lute, to the modern guitar, this quest for that combination of the perfect woods, cut, shaped, braced and joined in just the right way, to get just the right tonal quality, projection and playability has been the purview of those superlative craftsmen we now refer to as master luthiers.

The skill, dedication and experience required to accomplish this are not trivial. In earlier times, the true master luthiers passed on their knowledge and techniques to apprentices over the course of many years of close, working association. It was a tradition that extended to many, highly skilled pursuits, but none more romantic nor more revered than the making of fine musical instruments.

That tradition lives on in the guitar shop of Bruce and Matt Petros of Petros Guitars. Bruce Petros, master luthier and founder, has been the creative force behind Petros Guitars since 1972. During that time, Petros incorporated an impressive array of innovative features and construction techniques into the crafting of a limited number of exceptionally fine, completely hand made guitars each year.

I spent some time with Bruce and Matt Petros in their shop not long ago. I was eager to learn how they managed to produce such consistently great guitars.

Bruce Petros began my education on the Petros art of making guitars by explaining why pre-stressing the top of a guitar is so important. This, according to Petros, is the single biggest factor in producing the extraordinary treble notes that are the hallmark of Petros Guitars. By creating a slight arch in the top (braced to a 30 foot radius), the clarity and distinctiveness of the guitar's highs ascend to new levels. In addition to the elegant, symmetrical bracing Petros

meticulously incorporates, and by using only the finest woods, the pre-stressed top makes these new levels possible. This feature, Petros explained, also adds stability and strength to the top, so Petros guitars are less susceptible to changes in the action when exposed to varying levels of humidity and temperature. Finally, the Petroses significantly thin the edges of each top around its entire perimeter. This enhances the ability of the top to vibrate more freely in a way that brings out those low fundamentals.

The bridge plate system is another place where tone, structure and stress are accounted for in a new way. Although the bridge is also a brace, Petros explained, the top can use some additional support for all that string tension. So Petros uses hand selected spruce instead of the usual, sound-damping hardwood at this tonally sensitive area of the guitar's top. A small, ebony, pin plate, to support the ball ends of the strings is then added. This Petros design culminates in a bridge plate system that has less mass and more strength while significantly enhancing the steel strung, acoustic guitar's tone.

The backward tilt bridge and saddle is another feature unique to Petros acoustic guitars. This design attribute is near and dear to my heart because I had a similar idea when working in a classic guitar luthier's shop many years ago. To see it applied was especially gratifying for me.

With this design, the break angle of the strings is equalized. This puts significantly less stress on the saddle and bridge than the standard straight up and down design which

Petros

has been known to break the front of the bridge off on occasion.
A fully compensated saddle is also an absolute must for perfecting a guitar's intonation, Petros warned. This is especially true for alternate tunings. This means shaping the top of the saddle so the point where the string breaks over the saddle is exactly right for the diameter, tension and height of that string.

Petros explained it this way. Although the 12th fret is theoretically halfway between the nut and the saddle, the string is stretched whenever the player presses it to the fret. This makes the note go a bit sharp. The amount the note goes sharp is further influenced by the following factors:

- The diameter (or gauge) of the string. The bigger the string, the more it goes sharp. Petros cautioned me to keep in mind that the windings on wound strings don't count. It is only the core of the string that stretches. Therefore the B string is actually larger in diameter than the G string and, as a result, goes sharper when pressed to a fret. That is why the B string compensation is further back on the bridge saddle than the G string.
- The tension of the string. Longer scale lengths (the distance between the nut and bridge saddle) need more tension to bring a string up to pitch. The more tension there is on a string, the less it goes sharp with additional stretching. Strings with less tension go sharper proportionally with additional stretching. Short scale length guitars need less tension to bring the strings to pitch. Therefore, short scale guitars need much more compensation and are more troublesome. Any scale length when tuned down (the normal direction for alternate

tunings) requires more compensation because of the lessened tension. Petros uses a scale length of 25 ½ inches most of the time but has recently introduced a 24 ½ inch short scale option.

- The height of the string. The higher the string, the more it stretches as the player pushes it to the fret and the sharper it becomes. Petros' backward tilted bridges and saddles uniquely compensate for this. As the action is raised at the bridge saddle, the saddle actually goes back as well as up, thus "compensating" for the higher action by increasing the vibrating length of the string. Petros compensated saddles are actually strobed a couple cents flat on the bench at standard string height and tuning. This is done, Petros explained, because in the real world, players stretch the strings more than in the controlled manner done on the bench. Top quality bone is the standard saddle material for Petros guitars.

Neck construction is another area of innovation for Petros Guitars. Petros necks are constructed with two, end to end, flip matched pieces of high quality, Honduras Mahogany. This technique counteracts any tendency a board might have to warp in a particular direction. In addition, it creates a very classy look at the heel. The Petroses then laminate a veneer between the neck and the fret board. This makes for a functionally strong yet visually attractive neck.

Real, dovetailed neck joints are becoming less and less common in acoustic guitars. Petros says that is for reasons of production convenience. The Petroses, from their many years of experience, believe in the integrity of this joint and use it on all Petros guitars even though other types of joints are easier to make.

The final feature of the Petros neck that I especially appreciate because of my large hands, is found in the unique design of the fingerboard. The board's edges taper out rather than being perpendicular to the fret board face. This enables Petros to take

Petros

nearly 5% more wood off the neck while still creating lots of room on top for a better feel, less playing fatigue and great articulation.

Petros attributes the success of his acoustic guitar innovations to the fact that he is very much a self-made luthier. Petros believes that if you want creative, new ideas for resolving any complex challenge (like the making of an exquisite guitar) seek input from those who have had no background or prior experience with such challenges. Petros says he was such a person over 40 years ago when he began making his dream of creating the finest guitars a reality. He came to luthiery with a deep, innate talent and a great feel for woods but no prior training in musical instrument making what-so-ever. He had no pre-conceived notions of "how things should be done." As a result, Petros was able to bring fresh new thinking to guitar making that, over time, resulted in the creative features described above and an exceptionally ingenious workspace design.

Now Bruce's son, Matt, is moving into the "first chair" at Petros Guitars. Matt Petros' commitment is to carry on the Petros "Passion for Perfection."

In the best tradition of early European apprenticeship, Matt Petros, Bruce's thirty seven year old son, began as a full time apprenticing luthier in the year 2000. But Matt's real beginnings in his father's shop go back over thirty one years to when he was just six years old. It was then that Bruce first noticed Matt's natural feel, his innate talent for working wood. Bruce nurtured and encouraged Matt's obvious talent.

Today, Matt Petros would be much more

aptly described as a protégé than an apprentice. As the reins of Petros Guitars are slowly turned over to Matt, Bruce Petros says, "Matt now consistently demonstrates a great feel for what is required to produce an outstanding guitar. He's got it. I still try to challenge him from time to time, but that's gotten harder to do as each year passes. He is my equal in just about every step of guitar making and has brought his own flare to some, which has made him even better at those."

Bruce Petros will remain involved with Petros Guitars "forever," he says. "People occasionally ask me when I plan to retire. I just smile. I 'retired' over 40 years ago when I first started doing what I truly love – making guitars. As Matt takes over more of the day to day responsibilities for Petros Guitars, I'll be freed up to do more creating and innovating."

For example, because of Matt's mastery Bruce has had the time to develop a new, flexible purfling that has revolutionized this decorative aspect of instrument building. For over 400 years purfling designs have been limited. The construction of purfling remained unchanged during that entire time. And that construction has made purfling very difficult to bend. With the advent of Bruce's new patented purfling product, called Purflex®, hundreds of new designs are now possible, all of which are extremely easy to bend and apply. Builders of ukuleles, guitars, harps and sitars have been using this new product with great delight and energetic enthusiasm.

In addition to the purfling innovations, Bruce has also developed decorative back strips, engraved tuner buttons, truss rod covers, end pins, bridge pins, rosettes, position markers and strap buttons. (For more information on Purflex and these other innovations see www.purflex.net for more details.)

Even more recently, the Petroses have introduced arm bevels and pierced sound port rosettes. Although not a huge fan of arm bevels, the amount of requests have convinced the Petroses to include

Petros

PETROS

them as an option. The top of a guitar is the key to the quality of its sound and therefore must remain as free to move as can be. So the Petroses have insisted on keeping the bevels as small as possible and designed them to be situated more on the side of the guitar than on the top. This provides a balanced trade off; an improved level of player comfort while still preserving as much top as possible.

On the other hand, the Petroses recognized the considerable benefits of side ports. Side ports provide the player an actual sound monitor. In addition they relieve more internal air pressure thus allowing the top to move more freely. This has the effect of increasing volume and bass.

However, the Petros sound port, like so many other aspects of Petros guitars, is unique. It's not just a hole in the side of the guitar. Once again, Bruce went his own way and developed a series of laminated, pierced matching inserts, each adding a decorative flare to the port as well as enhancing strength.

Currently the Petroses are building an impressive addition to their shop. The new space, Bruce says, will allow them to, "Stretch out and stimulate our creative juices."

Matt's presence made all of these innovations and improvements possible.

The Petros "Passion for Perfection" is made plain to those guitarists who have had the great good fortune to play a Petros guitar. There is a mysterious, elusive quality that, to my experience, only arises during the playing of a truly great guitar. The Spaniards refer to this quality as duende, the "spirit within." For me, as a serious acoustic guitarist for over 50 years, this quality is rare indeed. Yet Bruce and Matt Petros manage to infuse their guitars with this evocative "spirit" with reliable consistency.

But the art of making guitars this good is NOT common-place. For those of us who swoon over guitars that sound and play as good as Petros', we can be grateful that the Petros "Passion for Perfection" is being passed on from father to son.

I played six of Petros' most recently completed guitars while I was at the their shop, which is tucked neatly underneath the Petros' living quarters in a spacious, handsome white house in Kaukauna, Wisconsin. Even in their newness, each guitar was extraordinary, captivating. That playing, coupled with my newly acquired understanding of the ingenious techniques, the masterfully designed work space, the skill and care applied to each of the many steps in creating a Petros guitar, made it clear that it was this entire collection of creative thought and effort, along with Petros' complete dedication to quality, that manifests as the art of the Petros father/son luthiers. Through this art the Petroses manage to consistently make guitars in which the whole is greater than the sum of their parts.

Visit www.petrosguitars.com
Petros Guitars
345 Co Road CE
Kaukauna, WI 54130

Ruokangas
Captain Nemo

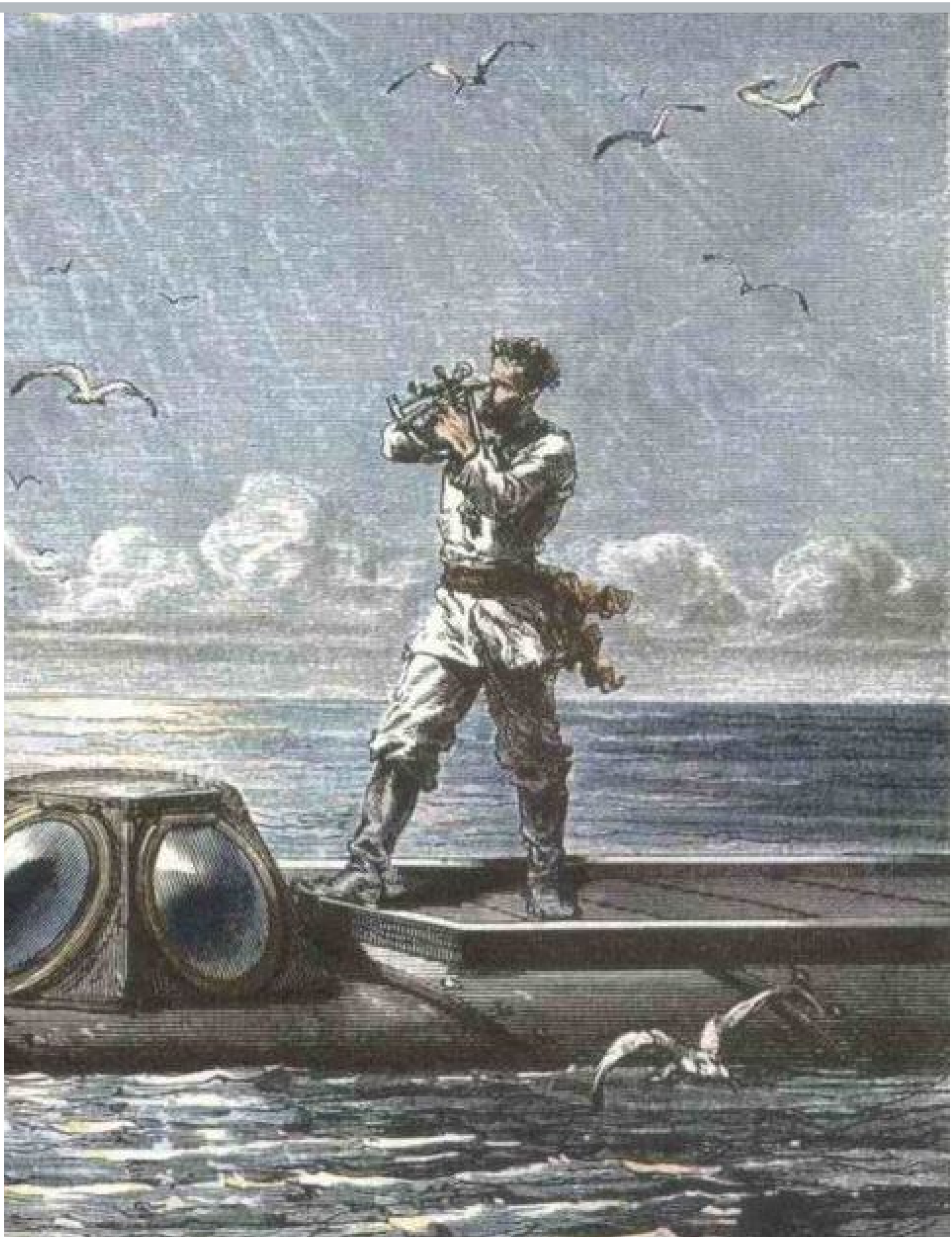
by Juha Ruokangas

This peculiar project started on a long car ride with a good friend. We discussed the evolution of the electric guitar and challenged each other to brainstorm its future direction. Or, we wondered, will the electric guitar remain mostly true to its beginnings in the 1930s and the '40s all the way through to the 1950s and '60s when it sculpted pop culture. We talked about the era of digitalization, auto-tuning guitar tuners, modeled amps and about the sound "moving" from an acoustic live environment to loudspeakers, to turntable, then to CD, MP3 players and eventually to the planetary network where "all the music" is available for everybody who is "plugged in." Business structures have been born and shattered to pieces to make way for new structures...

And then, somehow our conversation geared back to the very roots of electric guitar. What if the electric guitar had been invented in the late 19th century—say, 1895? We were thrilled by the idea, fantasizing about this Victorian-era electric guitar! I was driving, and my friend was checking the Internet on his smartphone, scanning historic facts about the era of the second Industrial Revolution that led to inventions such as electrification and the telephone.

So there we were, conjuring up theories about the electric guitar hadn't been invented earlier than the 1930s. Technically, that certainly could have happened, given that the magnetic pickup was a much older invention (it was part of the telephone, second half of the 19th century). But the motive to invent an electric guitar in 1895 would have needed to be something other than what it was in the 1930s, because the loudspeaker did not see the light of day until the 1920s. A need feeds innovation. Early humans wanted to be warm and dry, so they lived in caves, figured out ways to use fire to their advantage. Electric guitar fulfilled the need of producing a louder sound so that a bigger audience could hear it. If there was no loudspeaker in 1895, why on earth would someone be thinking of creating an electric guitar back then?

After this discussion—the Nemo Car Ride, as my friend and I now refer to it—I continued working on the idea, fascinated by certain elements that had popped into our minds. Visually, I ended up using my Unicorn guitar as the



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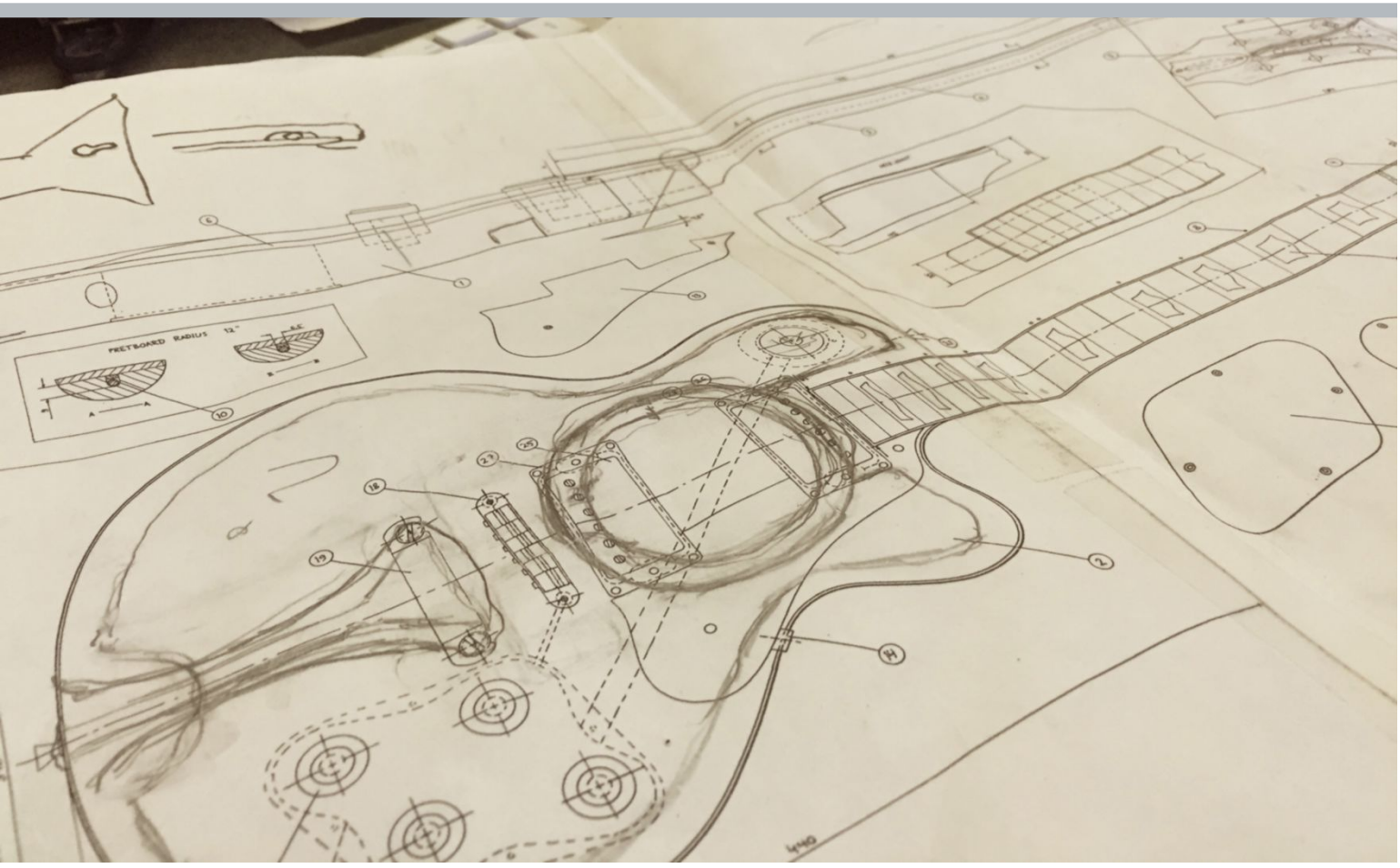

basis of this "first electric guitar in the world," as I had tentatively (and provocatively) named the project by then. This felt like the logical choice, given that I had designed the Unicorn model to be my salute to the traditional single-cut electric guitar. When designing the Unicorn, I wanted to challenge myself to create something that looked familiar enough that players would not be scared of it, but at the same time would be a genuinely fresh approach. The Unicorn is influenced by the original Gibson Les Paul guitar in some ways, while its body shape pays homage to old jazz boxes by Stromberg or the old German manufacturer Höfner. I was pretty unorthodox regarding the choice of wood materials, too. (A previous article in GC discusses the Unicorn design, and readers who are interested finding the topic can look up the 17-episode Unicorn Video Diary on YouTube.)

I saw the "first electric guitar" as a sort of mash-up of the Unicorn, a violin and a classical guitar—and I wanted the guitar to reflect my Nordic roots in some way. Material-wise, I ended up going with a spruce top and Northern Hemisphere hardwood back, sides and neck. Typically, with a violin, the hardwood would have been maple, but for me, coming from Finland, the natural choice was Arctic birch. I found a nice piece of Finnish spruce for the top; I think this piece of wood belonged to one of my employees, Jyrki, and if I didn't remember to tell him I took it, maybe he will now read it from GC and come after me! For the fretboard I went the traditional (violin) way and used a very nice jet-black piece of ebony. I also used ebony for the headstock overlay and tailpiece, which both feature fantastic wood carvings by master carver Jani Rinta-Keturi. The bridge of the guitar is also made of ebony, with an inserted compensated

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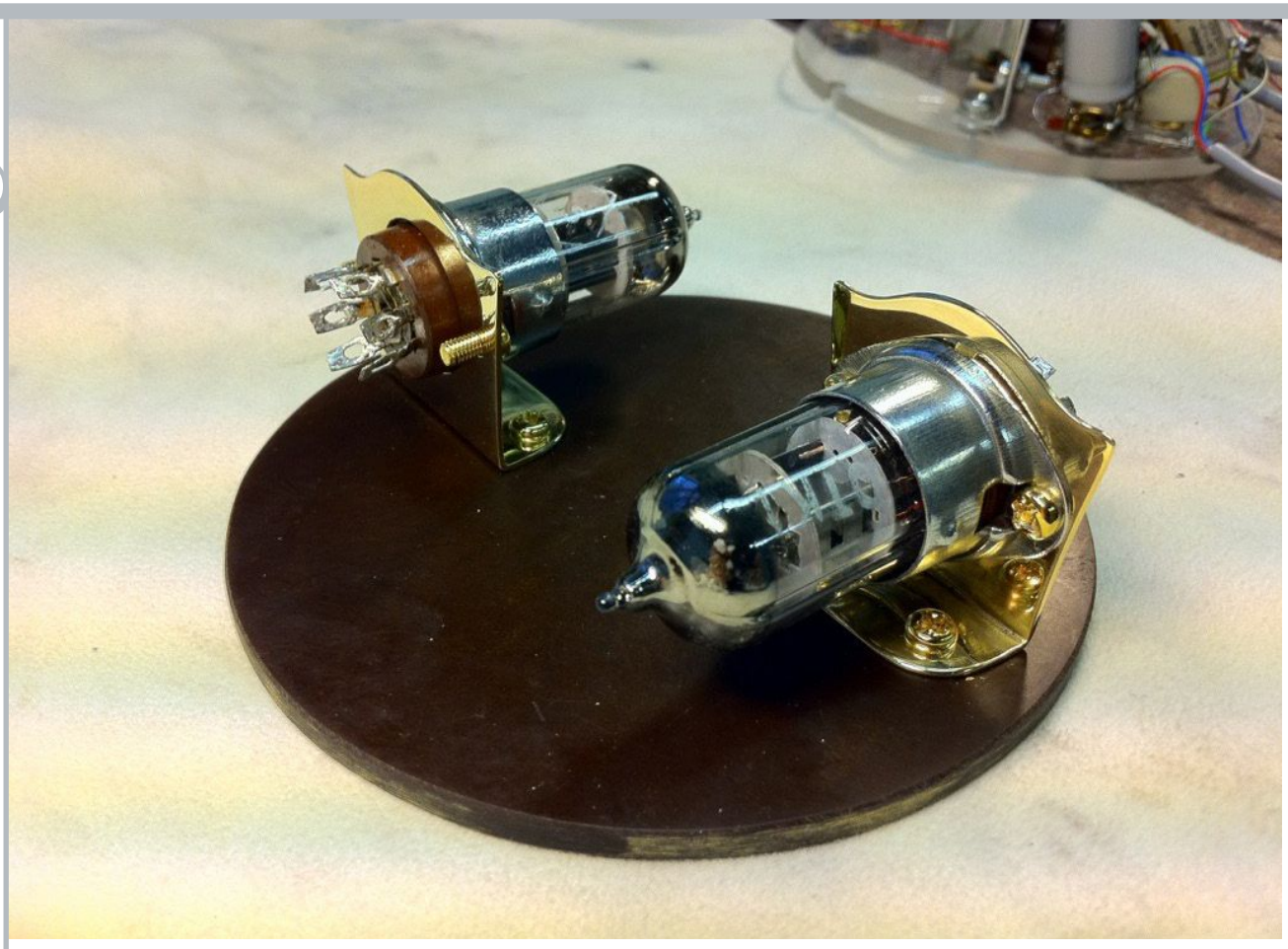
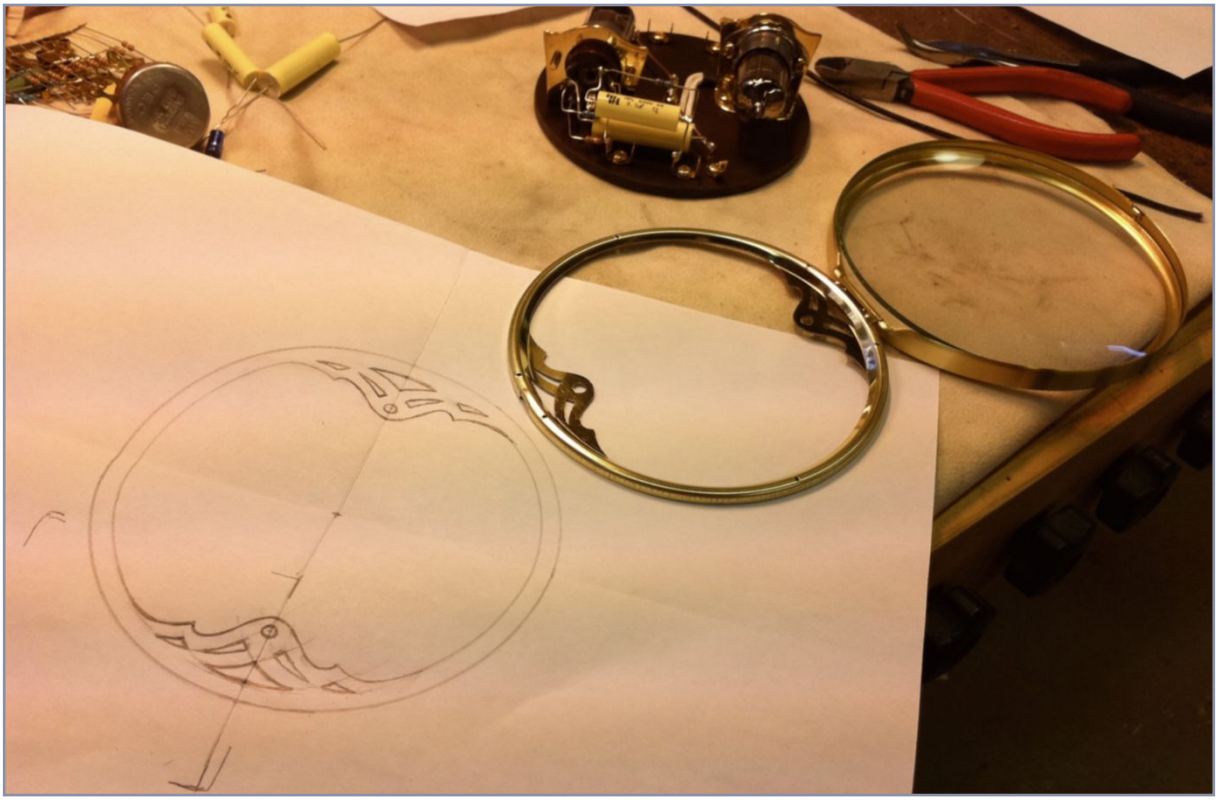


saddle made of moose shin bone—our trademark choice of material for every Ruokangas guitar nut bone ever made. One of the points of interest regarding this guitar design is the way the top and back hang over the side of the body. It's another feature that was obviously influenced by the violin. This is naturally a conceptual design in many ways, but I did spend a lot of time trying to put myself into the shoes of a 19th-century innovative luthier, striving to find the logical path to how the design would have been born at the time. Even though I took some artistic liberties regarding technical solutions and materials used, the fundamentals of the guitar feel very "real" to me. All the functionality of the guitar could have been there in 1895.

The heart and soul of this "new old guitar" was the pickup design. This is the very idea that blew me and my friend away on that car ride. We were leafing through history articles about the telephone microphone/pickup and also about the vacuum tube, which was invented in the late 19th century to enable long-distance calls. Reading about these two things—the telephone and the vacuum tube—was the eureka moment for me: "Let's design an active pickup using vacuum tubes!" Sure, it sounds totally nuts in a way, but it could have been done as early as 1895. So I started doing sketches of the design, and it all added up in a natural way. I wanted to have some visual resemblance to the classical guitar, and this idea aligned perfectly with the active



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pickup design that needed space under the strings: magnetic pickup stuck to the round hole, tubes and the preamp glowing below; an old, framed convex glass covering the whole thing... And voilà—I had a pickup that, upon quick glance, looked like the sound hole of a classical guitar!

Somewhere down the road I started to call the guitar "Captain Nemo." I think the name fits the looks of the pickup and the whole Victorian style of the guitar. There is certainly something Jules Verneish in the design. Very steampunk—but with one important difference from the average steampunk items: The Captain Nemo guitar is fully functional. Every detail has a function. There are no glued-on gearwheels or other trinkets just for the looks. I was on the trail to create something that really could have existed.

When this tube pickup idea came along, it dawned on me pretty quickly that I couldn't do it by myself. The happy coincidence was that Jorma Kostamo, father of my employee Jyrki, is not only a retired army intelligence officer but also an electronics engineer by education. Jorma has worked all his life with vacuum tubes. He's like a living library of information about tubes. So, Jorma is the guy who designed the preamp wiring for the ValveBucker®, as the pickup was named and trademarked later. I'm delighted that he agreed to work on my craziest ideas!

So, why was this electric guitar invented, if not to plug it into an amp and loudspeaker? I know this gets a bit far-fetched, but it could have happened. In theory, you could have plugged the thing into a telephone line and called the operator to connect you to your guitar teacher on the other side of the planet, who would have picked up his telephone and heard the signal of the ValveBucker amplified guitar. In theory, the teacher also could have had such a guitar. And there you go—the first ever remote guitar lesson, more than a hundred years before Skype!

Also, if the guy who plays the guitar plugged it into a telephone line, that means he can't hear the signal—only the receiver hears it. And that's why the guitar needs two things: a "sustain meter" to show that the signal is on, and a display to show how loud the signal is. Obvious, right?

The tube preamp needs an external power source. We made a box to be held on the floor. Very simple—we basically only needed the box for the power transformer to provide the correct voltage and enough juice to the guitar. Then again, if this thing had been built in 1895, we figured that wasn't the way to go. So we ended up putting a massive lever switch on the side of the box. That's how you power up the guitar—like a Tesla invention, right? We also decided to try to put a dual nixie tube display on the box to show the guitar volume pot position from 0 to 11. I thought it was a great idea, and Jorma told me: "Yeah, no problem." But then a year later he came up with a pile of schematics and was a bit hesitant to continue, not sure if it would work out. I finally convinced him it would be cool enough to justify the effort. The size of the box on the floor kept growing bigger so we could fit all the electronics—all just to run the nixie tube display! We also placed the sustain meter on the guitar in the position where you would traditionally have the three-way pickup selector toggle switch. I wanted the guitar to have four pots just like the Les Paul, but I only had one pickup. And there was another challenge, which we solved by developing and installing a three-band tonestack to the guitar.

I worked on this guitar for five years on and off with Jorma. My employees had probably lost their hope that I would ever even finish it. Then, in early 2014, it started to look like we were making great progress on a whole other front. I'm one of the founding members of the European Guitar Builders (EGB) association, and our idea was to launch a new boutique guitar show in Europe. I'm proud of the fact that everyone else in EGB liked my idea to name the event "the Holy Grail Guitar Show," and so by early 2014 we were all set, working our asses off as a community, to have the premiere Holy Grail Guitar Show in Berlin, November 2014. During the planning for the show, I kept thinking: "Man, I just have to get this guitar ready by November!" I had about six months to prepare, and I was a million miles away from being ready with the design. So things picked up speed, and by early October I was hopeful, though my employees weren't. They admitted afterward that they didn't believe I could pull it off. I remember, about a week before showtime, desperately trying to make the electronics work correctly.

This guitar was experimental on so many levels, and we didn't really know what to expect from it. Sure, it looked awesome, and considering my wood materials I knew it would be a decent guitar. But none of us had any idea how it would sound. I guess I was hoping it would work well enough, and that it wouldn't sound totally weird when plugged into a guitar amp. I'll admit I was expecting that the project would be a success in a gimmicky sort of way, but not necessarily anything larger than life as a musical instrument.

So when I finally plugged the guitar into an amp (a stock Peavey Classic 30 combo), I was stunned. That amp had never sounded like that! The dynamics of the guitar were superb, and the depth and warmth of the tone was unique—such clarity and musical definition. There was a hard-to-describe acoustic quality to it, like having a piezo pickup installed on the bridge of the guitar—except this one didn't have any of the piezo sizzle, but instead had a beautiful acoustic timbre.

I was not only stunned by the sound, but also puzzled like hell! How could the guitar sound like that? We had a long talk with Jorma and finally came to realize, that our idea that had evolved to be the ValveBucker—a round chassis, situated like the sound hole of a classical guitar, magnetic pickups and the tube preamp fitted to the chassis—had caused an unexpected side effect. The magnetic field of the pickup is right there in close distance to the tubes. And the tubes have iron in them. Iron is affected by a magnetic field. The magnetic pickup communicated with the tubes via the magnetic field! This added a whole new dimension to the tone.

Right now, we're in full swing experimenting with future prototypes of

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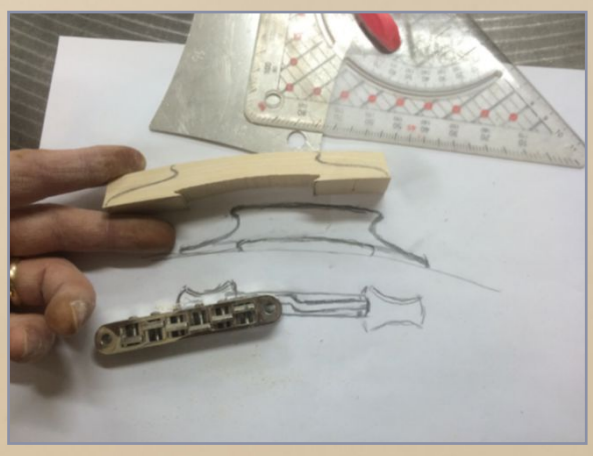

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the ValveBucker. We're learning every day to understand better why it works like it does, and how we can make it even better. We're trying different things to study the fundamentals. For me, it's the same as with tonewood; I want to know my stuff inside out before I sell it to people. I'm convinced that our R&D process will have great results during 2015, and I feel strongly that the ValveBucker may well be one of the most important inventions I've ever had a chance to work on.

This crazy journey to an alternative past has been such a joyous trip, and also a great lesson and reminder: Let your creativity roam free, just like child's play. That is really the only way to genuine innovation. Forget your ego and let yourself be crazy, bubbling with whatever ideas. Be brave enough to say it and do it—to listen, to have fun, to free your mind. That's the biggest lesson I learned. To find the unexpected, you need to let go and jump into the unknown.

Jimmy Vivino

THEY STEPPED OUT OF HIS RECORD COLLECTION AND INTO HIS LIFE

by Greg Jones

Photos: Kim Mancuso

A recent news story about high school students and their knowledge of US history, or rather the astonishing lack thereof, ended with the old adage about those who do not know history being doomed to repeat it and predicted great troubles ahead for the current generation of the young. This being a music publication, I couldn't help transferring this train of thought into rock music history. Are we being as ill-served by our music press and institutions such as the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame as high school students are by the schools and media that so tries to shape their minds? And are glaring omissions from that history enough to seriously limit our own experience with music in detrimental long-lasting ways?

I can't say for certain, but one thing I can say: when I encounter someone who knows music's history, especially from being part of making it, I get really inspired.

Case in point: Jimmy Vivino may primarily be known to the public as the Music Director and guitarist on Conan O'Brien's TV show but he's also an arranger/composer/producer of tremendous accomplishment who gives passionate performances and has played with a veritable who's who of great artists. In this heartfelt talk, you will find out some tips the legendary session men shared with him, the existence of an as-yet unreleased album that many would consider the Holy Grail (but that there is currently no record label interest in) and who really invented heavy metal. He also shares countless stories of all the musical giants he's been blessed to play alongside and what made them each so special, as well as who the great songwriters in rock and popular music are and what you need to do to work as a musician. Listen to the recent live album 13 by his fiery band Jimmy Vivino and The Black Italians or see his unparalleled Beatles tribute band The Fab Faux and you'll discover that real music, steeped in heart-rending depth, dangerous and unpredictable, is alive and well, burning brightly through him and his friends, played for all the right reasons by this consummate artist.

Guitar Connoisseur: You and I, it turns out, were born in the same year, 1955?

Jimmy Vivino: That's right. We're classics now.

GC: (laughs) Certainly we grew up in the shadow of classics.

JV: Well we certainly grew up, if I may, just a little late. (laughs) For me. Just a little bit late. I was a kid looking over the fence, you know, at the big kids, at the greatest time for music as far as I'm concerned.

GC: You mean we were probably both too young to go to Woodstock?

JV: Well, I went to Watkins Glen right afterwards, 2 or 3 years later. I was too young to go to Woodstock but I was going to the Fillmore when I was 13, so, yay! Under supervision of somebody's older brother who would

take us, because we had a band already so, it was like well, this is the place to go. It was a great atmosphere to begin, for me. To be 9 years old watching the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, and seeing the other guitar bands. I didn't remember Elvis and Buddy Holly – there seemed to be a dry period between Elvis and Buddy Holly of real rock and roll on TV. What we had more was, it turned into The Four Seasons and stuff like that.

GC: Which was, it had –

JV: Oh, it was, it was great…

GC: I know what you mean, it was as if, after Buddy Holly, they re-thought letting us be exposed to the real guitar bands.

JV: We missed it because down South they had The!!!! Beat, the Hoss Allen show, they had a lot of TV shows where they had black r&b artists on. We didn't see those guys. We didn't see Little Richard and we didn't see Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley and Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters. We just didn't see 'em, y'know? We were kind of, Ed Sullivan was it for us for a long time until later when Shindig came along. Right after The Beatles, everything got rock and roll on TV.

GC: When I was a kid on the West Coast watching Where The Action Is and American Bandstand, I always felt like there was a blanket of safety over it all.

JV: Oh sure, sure – it was produced, you know?

GC: Whereas the records my older brother was bringing into the house were like, ah, here's where the real danger is.

JV: Yeah, my older brother, too. He brought mostly soul music in, Motown and Stax and that kind of stuff. He wasn't really into guitar bands much. But anyway, I don't want to dominate the conversation with this.

GC: No, no (laughs), that's fine.

JV: Is this about gear or music or what's - ?

GC: Well the first question I have for you is: what age did you notice music having a profound effect on you?

JV: Oh okay, the first thing I remember was my father playing his trumpet. He was great. He would come home from work, sit on the couch with his coronet and follow along with Louis Armstrong and Charlie Shavers and Bunny Berigan, just all the cats, the heavy trumpet guys. Trumpet was king when my father was a kid. Harry James, all those guys. He was a trumpet player. But he wasn't allowed to be because he was a carpenter, from a family of construction workers, so, that's what he did. They told him music wasn't a serious thing. So music was around the house all the time. It was mostly jazz and Broadway records until my aunt moved in when she was 16. My mother's kid sister moved in and that's when I started hearing what Italian kids listened to which was Dion, the Four Seasons, Bobby Darin, y'know? It was Italian sort-of rock'n'roll, it was rock in suits, you know? With a guy up front that had really good hair…

GC: (laughing)

JV: Now Dion's really a great pal of mine now, it turns out he's really a blues man at heart. That's why the Belmonts were so great, cuz he sang like an r&b cat. So I heard a lot of that and then of course Sinatra and Dean Martin and Louis Armstrong and Judy Garland, everywhere, that kind of music. So my father played trumpet and when I was nine or eight or so, I started to pick it up and he started teaching me. I played trumpet and we had a piano in the house so I picked that up.

GC: Did you actually take up piano before the guitar?

JV: Yes. At 23 I switched to guitar.

GC: 23?! Oh, you're blowing my mind – that's incredible!

JV: If a kid picks up a guitar at 15 he's a genius by 17 today, right?

GC: (laughs)

JV: I have a great friend that's doing a gig, we're doing a tribute to our friend Johnny Winter who passed away, Joe Bonamassa, he's going to do a gig out here this Monday night coming up, and I know Joe from 12. He sang with his father, who used to come to guitar shows in Long Island and had a store in Utica. So this fat little kid used to pick up the guitar at 12 years old and I would bring him up on stage with me when we'd play at night at the shows. He's remained like a kid brother to me to this day. So I saw you could develop really quickly if you spent a lot of time with it. That's my point. It doesn't matter how old or how young you are, if you put the time in, concentrated. Plus I had all this music background before, you know, of having a guitar around the house, knowing the few cowboy chords everybody did. So whatever was around, I would pick it up and play it. Except for saxophone, I left to brother Gary.

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Jimmy Vivino

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Jimmy Vivino

GC: That kind of backs up the definition of the word "instrument" as a tool.

JV: Sure, because they're all – it's so much better if you start on a reading instrument if you know what I mean and then apply it to everything else. Going from the trumpet to the piano where the map is so visual on the piano – the note is in one place.

GC: And all the great sheet music, too.

JV: So I just played organ in band, trumpet and organ for a long time. Had a B3 and all of that. Besides guitar influences, Al Kooper and Steve Winwood were huge influences on me because they did both. I loved that they both played guitar and organ equally well. That became a focus for me, of getting the guitar together, for a long time. Finally I just got tired of lugging the damn B3 around you know?

GC: (**laughs**)

JV: My brother who was the saxophone player in the band, he owned the van, so he would always be "Oh man, the damn B3? I'm going out on a date!" - you had the B3 and the two Leslies in the back of the van. Throw a blanket over them and have a ball, you know?

GC: That's funny. As a drummer I would watch Jethro Tull and think, that guy with the flute, now he's got the right idea.

JV: Really, really, man. I'm sure we saw a lot of the same great music. When we grew up, by the time 1964 came around I was 9 and I was playing the trumpet, there was always a seed of "that's cool - who could teach me that?" And they're up there and they're - I remember seeing The Ventures or The Beach Boys - but not a band of four guys, playing and singing and writing, just all self-contained.

GC: I remember, whenever someone put a record out, whether it was The Beatles or The Stones or whoever, it almost seemed like the universe was exploding open even wider with every new album released.

JV: Well that's because, as you say, the album, we got the album. The singles, for example, I bought singles, they were it for a while, yes; but when it became evident that there was so much more on the album that we weren't hearing and, you know, that search that kids have for more. Also you could just put it on and let it roll for twenty minutes. (laughing) And then turn it over and let it roll for another twenty minutes.

GC: I remember my father thinking there was something wrong with his 12 year old son who could play baseball but wanted to wile away hours sitting and listening to music.

JV: Yeah that was totally "not right". But at the same time my brothers and I had training, we had a dance team, we sang and we acted - we had seen the Osmonds on the Andy Williams Summer Special and my parents would say, "well, if you're going to be in show business, that's what you need to be doing. Everything. You need to be like Sammy Davis. Play drums, sure; but dance and sing and play the trumpet and do everything. You have to do everything." They came from that Mickey Rooney and Hollywood musicals, you know, put the show together in the barn, everybody seemed so talented. So the criteria was everything, not just rock and roll. I always had that sensibility about working. When people ask me do you want to come do a college and teach something? Well first of all, most of these kids can play rings around me - but they don't know how to work. I'll talk about how to get a job out there. How to make this a living. Or how it worked for me to do that, because the climate's changed again. There's no clubs. I worked seven nights a week in lounges playing six sets a day, and that doesn't exist anymore.

GC: Right.

JV: But I think everything you do takes you to the next place. The trumpet and the keyboard and all that was great, but at 23 I switched over to guitar. I took some lessons from some serious jazz cats cuz I thought that, even though I wasn't going to be a jazz player, I needed to go in over my head.

GC: You knew they knew something that a lot of the more basic guys didn't know?

JV: Well they knew how to work. These guys were studio musicians. They weren't just bebop guys. Everybody in the studio in that 50s, 60s, 70s were trained and jazz was sort of their recreation. Jazz, it's like - it's funny, the higher the level you get, the less you get paid. In music. (laughs)

GC: (**laughing sadly**) **That is funny, isn't it?**

JV: I know guys that are playing first chair in symphony that have to teach all week long to supplement their income. And that's a dedication. I said man there must be a way to do all of this, to play and to work at the same time. And that's why the playing part, to me, it's never finished anyway; I'm still studying stuff, I'm still going back to my records and listening to things. And I know, I'm glad there are a lot of great, bright players on the horizon, right at the top, Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks and Joe Bonamassa, cats that have been around. Guitar, my whole life is guitar now. I play a lot of piano still and arrange but guitar is really what I focus on.

GC: Hearing you point to Al Kooper and Steve Winwood as role models, I think of the story where Al Kooper shows up to that Bob Dylan session (**Like A Rolling Stone**) **to play guitar, hears another guitar player that he thinks is doing great stuff on it and so he hops on the organ and proceeds to make one of the great organ recordings of that era.**

JV: Al was in that work environment of the Brill building, you know, and all the songwriters and he was already doing that stuff. He'd worked before playing, with the Royal Teens, "Short Shorts", and The Blues Project would start soon after the Dylan session, and him and Harvey Brooks grew up together in Forest Hills. My brothers and I were dancing together

Jimmy Vivino

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at The New Jersey Pavilion, doing our tap dance routine in 1964 and I'm nine years old, Al and Harvey are playing at the Queens Pavilion, three shows a day on top of the carousel.

GC: It's funny that you're making connections at 9 years old and you don't even know it.

JV: We didn't know it but we're like best friends now and so we always talk about that, as kids, we were working right down the road. And I'm like, yeah, but I was nine, and you were nineteen, so you weren't even going to look at me and say hello, and I was too afraid to say hello to you. That's a funny crossing of the paths. But he was working, too, obviously, so his parents were not gonna allow it unless he was making money and working, and my parents were the same way. I had the option of slinging a hammer on the roof, you know?

GC: (laughing) Right!

JV: Not very good. So I practiced, and when we were kids, because he had musical ability, they would say "play your lesson for me." If we couldn't play our lesson, "well, you're not going, I'm not spending the money on you".

GC: That takes me back.

JV: And there were times when you weren't learning, and I'd go in the room and cry, I felt so bad, money was tight anyway, so it would have been worse if they'd spent the money on me and I'd gotten away with not having my lesson together. And it was all good. Everything today, people would say, "Oh your father's passive-aggressive", or "Oh you were ADHD" "You're obsessive-compulsive" – all the things that make us musicians are all the things they give kids drugs for today.

GC: Right. And the thing our parents were afraid of about us becoming musicians was that we were going to get into drugs.

JV: (laughing) Right! So here's a way to stop them from being musicians: give 'em the drugs first!

GC: Yeah! It's crazy.

JV: I mean, all of us kids, we had a lot of nervous energy, we had to put bands together, and we got together in basements and we played and we played and we played and we were given praise for it so we weren't looked at as weird kids. We loved it, man; it seemed like a possibility, we weren't discouraged. In the town we lived in, they had dances, they had all kinds of activities, kids could play, there were 3 or 4 bands every Saturday night playing. We were all borrowing equipment from each other, it was very healthy. "Who's got the PA? I have a Shure Vocal Master. Wow." It was all about music. It wasn't about a computer game, it wasn't about sampling, and it wasn't about rapping, it was about singing and playing and all that.

GC: Or being marooned on an island with Pro Tools.

JV: Yeah, an island in your bedroom and you never come out of it. Not to say that a lot of talent doesn't

come out of this modern technology – a lot does – but I'd love to see kids getting together and playing music a lot. And I do. On my show I see them all the time. Kids come over from Ireland, they're 17, I can't remember the name of the band but they're unbelievable. They're like a cross between The Kinks and The Who. So I was like, wow! Maybe it does – maybe it skips a generation or something and then it comes back again.

GC: Listening to you talk about how you were focused on learning music in a way that you'd be able to work as a musician, I can almost imagine that maybe for you there wasn't a big line in the sand you crossed where you said "Here's my first serious break into the industry."

JV: You don't even know when it happens. You just keep working, you keep your head down and you work. An opportunity can knock, and then you'd better answer the door, or, you can't make it happen. There is a, I hate to say that there's luck and there's circumstance, it's not coincidence. I worked and worked and worked, played with my brothers, my older brother had a TV show called The Uncle Floyd Show that he did in New York.

GC: I saw it on U68.

JV: Yeah! He was a rogue in the cable business because he started on UHF but then he started buying his own time around town. He would go around town to the pet stores, to the barber shops, and say "Give me money, I'll put an ad for you on TV". The FCC doesn't allow this anymore but at the time, you could gather, he would gather $10,000 a week doing that, for advertising, and spend $2,000 a week making 5 shows.

GC: Wow!

JV: (laughing)
GC: That's really –

JV: Those are his numbers. I don't know if they're real numbers, but I have a feeling – it was much cheaper in those days. He'd rent the studio out, pay the cameramen – yeah! And they'd put 5 together in one day. And then all of a sudden, it became punk TV. David Bowie showing up, David Johansen of the New York Dolls showing up, The Ramones are showing up, Cyndi Lauper showing up, everybody that I met along the way was through my brother. And then we went and played shows opening for The Ramones and we played at The Bottom Line. Alan Pepper owned this club The Bottom Line which was the showcase of New York. I got to be very close with him and he started hiring me to put shows together.

GC: Wow, that's great.

JV: Ben E. King came and needed a band, he called me. We worked together, I met Paul Schaeffer through him, learned a lot about band leading and arranging. We did a couple of shows there, Leader Of The Pack and a couple other big shows we put on down there. That got me to Broadway, that got me to film scoring, through all the people I met there. And always learned from Paul that if you respect the record when you're backing somebody up, build it and they will come. Because a lot of acts in those days were – say you were going to, I don't know – say Peter Noone was coming in.

GC: Right; post-Herman's Hermits.

JV: He's got his charts, but they're like, you know, over-written Vegas charts. And he just hands them out to a band and they play what's on the paper, like, with no heart at all, and he phones in the performance and goes home. Now, if me or Paul was backing him up, we'd say "don't bring the charts, just give us a song list". And we would go to the records and learn those records like Gospel, like religion. And all of a sudden, when the singer starts hearing that, they come to life, man. They're back in that record, too. So it was always respect the record. That was the main thing. These records were our Bibles. So we respected them and we learned an awful lot about arranging and playing. Because the way these records were made, even The Monkees, if I play with Micky Dolenz like last year and we play it like the record, he just comes to life.

GC: It makes total sense; it never would have occurred to me as a listener to even imagine that these guys could be coming around handing out charts that were written badly for them.

JV: Well, they're just written in a way, in a show fashion. And in the case of The Temptations you can't help it, it's like hiring a big band, but everything got to be, it's like Copa Cabana time. So that only works for Barry Manilow.

GC: (**laughs**)

JV: Play his charts 'cuz Barry's charts are the record.

GC: It sounds like Paul taught you "hey, let's not forget what excited us about these records in the first place."

JV: Exactly. Exactly. And Paul also told me if the bass and drums are right, everything else will be easy to put on top of that. The bass and drums have to be absolutely correct.

GC: That raises a question. When you look at some of the seminal jazz records like Miles Davis albums, or the 70s British prog rock stuff or even the great pop records of the 60s, it seems like the role of the rhythm section is at least partially spelled out somewhat by whoever had written the piece. Whereas in the bluesier realms, to me anyway, it seems like there's an expected set of approaches to the rhythm but as long as you're within them, you're sort of free to improvise.

JV: Well if we're talking about making records, as opposed to recording blues or jazz – making a record, to us, was always a song and it's pop music. You know making a record, like an Aretha Franklin record, if you got Purdie and Rainey in the rhythm section, and Aretha on piano, you're done, man, that's the whole record right there. It's about hiring the right people. It's not all written out. This

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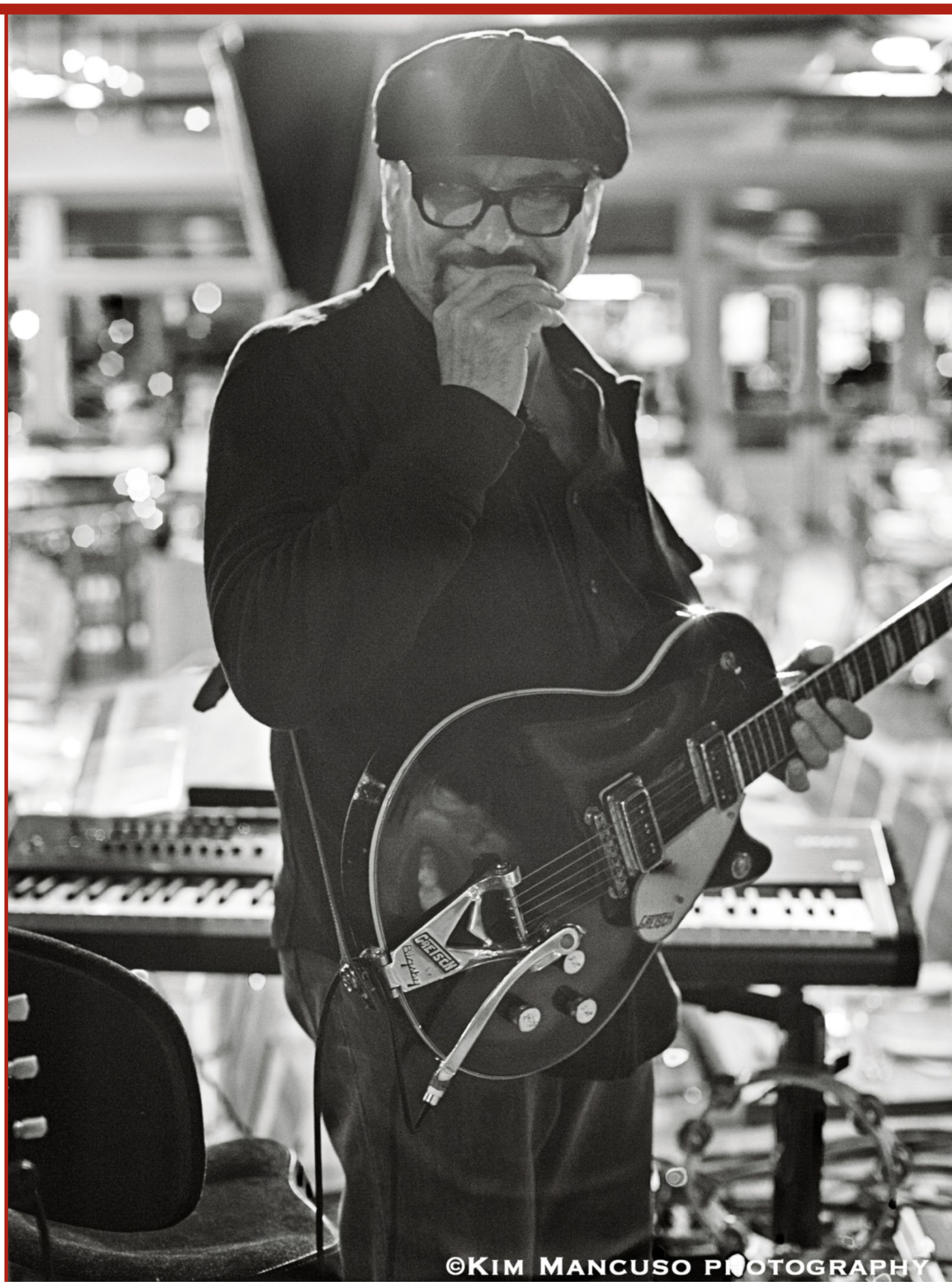

is the way guys played. James Jamerson and Ben Benjamin up in Motown played that way. Every note wasn't written for them. Yes there were sessions where every note was written and players would play them. But they had a sense of how to make it swing and work beyond what the arranger wrote.

GC: Gotcha.

JV: A lot of times they'd just put it away and say "I think I know what you meant." And the smart general is not the guy on the front line, it's the people he sends out on the front line, you know? The producer hires the right rhythm section and that's why rhythm sections became like tough gangs you didn't break into. So every town had a sound that was a rhythm section. The Meters were the most ignored, disrespected rhythm section in rock and roll and need to be in the Hall Of Fame. It's a shame what they're doing. Booker T and the MGs in Memphis, right? The Funk Bros. up in Detroit, in Chicago there was Morris Jennings and Louis Satterfield, the guys that backed up, made all those Impressions records with Curtis Mayfield. That band was the Chicago sound. In L.A. there was The Wrecking Crew, right? And in New York, Purdie and Rainey and those guys up at Atlantic - the Atlantic sound was unbelievable. And some of the Atlantic sound came from Muscle Shoals as we know. If you want, you go to this town and get it to sound like that. Detroit had cats too, man, and Detroit, that's another great rock & roll town. But the point is we found all this stuff out, we talked about it; the way people talked about baseball cards, we'd talk about records. Who's on that record and who arranged it - me and Paul would be "who did the strings for that? Who's the rhythm section on that? Oh there was this other guy -" Stuff like that. "And there was this other drummer besides Benny Benjamin " - we'd sit for hours, blah blah blah, it's - archeology, you know?

GC: Well some of these guys were still people you could call if you were producing, right?

JV: Oh yeah, yeah. I played with some of, I still play with some of these guys. Purdie gave me the best advice. He said "if your rhythm is louder than my hihat, you're too loud. If you want to solo, you can play as loud as you want; but when you're playing rhythm guitar you'd better key into my hihat." And he told the bass player to key into his bass drum. Cuz he knew more about, and he'll tell you about it, yeah. He knew more about what made a rhythm section happen organically. And could tell the young kids, he would always tell us. He'd give us advice. And I loved that about all those old cats. They were always willing to tell us what it was and we asked a lot. They didn't get a lot of money for what they did either, they had to do a lot of sessions to make money. They had to do like four a day and maybe they'd be taking home two hundred dollars at the end of the day.

GC: And making timeless, historical magic.

JV: Yeah and just creating a sound, so, this was the climate I was in, studio musicians, and I was wow, I want to be a part of it, be one of them. I never wanted to be the guy in front, the artist; I wanted to be the guy in the band, and the arranger, and what made it happen. To me it seemed more attractive than having to go through trying to have a career up front performing for other people and do all that. So there was this great option, of playing music and not even having to be the artist, that I loved.

GC: Yet still being able to infuse it with, either the instinctive approaches that made it so great or perhaps, in some cases, your own approach because you understood the vibe of the music?

JV: Yeah. And you know, you were talking about blues before? And how the guys could just play? That wasn't necessarily true because Muddy Waters really created modern electric Chicago blues with his band. My friend Bob Margolin played with Muddy till the end, he played with him for a long time. He was a white kid that Muddy took in. And for the first year or two he had to play the pattern, there was an alternate bass line - (sings "duh-doom, duh-doom, duh-doom, duh-doom"_ - a pattern - they didn't get off the pattern. Muddy'd give him the pattern. That's it. He didn't get to pick a beat, he didn't play rhythm guitar, cuz there was no rhythm guitar like Chuck Berry style rhythm guitar in Muddy's situation. It was based on Otis Spann's piano playing, the pattern, the two bass patterns and maybe a lead, another guitar playing a ride, sort of a Robert Lockwood sort of ride behind the singer or harmonica. But there wasn't, it was never like a guitar trio type of thing. It was constructed and arranged. Those records were arranged, Muddy was a brilliant arranger in that. And Willie Dixon being there, it was just - we think oh these guys just went in and cut; well, they took forty takes sometimes.

GC: Wow.

JV: To get that record. And there was the sound of Wolf's band, Chicago was deep, man; the Stones knew it, the Stones had to go there. And Fleetwood Mac, the English guys knew, something's going on at Chess, when you look at it. Besides Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf you had Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, it was just this amazing, amazing place for rock and roll. And then, what we know as blues rock comes from Chess Records. The English, they got that right away. I was into Paul Butterfield's Band, I loved Bloomfield, to no end, that's my favorite guitar player ever. I wasn't so much a Page/Plant/Beck guy, or Clapton; I was more of a Bloomfield, Johnny Winter and Leslie West was my guy.

GC: Oh, Leslie West, I mean, he invented a sound and nobody else can catch it.

JV: No, he invented heavy metal. He did. More than Page and those guys. He did.

GC: I saw Mountain once in Hawaii at The Waikiki Shell - an outdoor ampitheater under the stars in Hawaii - seated in the second row. And they started playing "Never In My Life" and Leslie smacks a

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chord and he knocked the power out in Honolulu! For ten minutes!

JV: (Laughing)

GC: The whole city was dark. It took something like fifteen minutes to sort things out and get power back so they could have the show. And nobody was upset, we all just couldn't wait because we had gotten that little taste of what was to come. To this day I can't find words to communicate the excitement that was generated by Mountain.

JV: And I saw them in a high school gym one town away from me. Someone would give them a high school gig, and then they'd play The Fillmore, or the Capitol Theater in Portchester, then run up to Boston and they'd make the East Coast - they'd stop in your town sometimes on a Wednesday night and you'd have a concert. And Mountain, sitting on the floor in front of those guys, this was when I guess Steve Knight had just joined, they had organ too, they had a B3 now too, with Felix and Leslie. And the sound of that guitar was - I'd never heard anything like that before in my life. Still! (laughs) And the size of the guy and the sound of his voice - and they're an unknown band today.

GC: That, to me, is so crazy.

JV: Deep Purple can't get into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame. So...with all due respect to everybody else, that got in before them, and Procol Harum, and Yes, these important bands - and King Crimson. We're in a - there's a weird void that a lot of really influential people have fallen into. That people are forgetting about. I guess that's, I don't want to be bitter about it, it's sad.

GC: On the one hand, you look at the general - and it's not even intentional - ignorance of people about these bands. And on the other hand, because of the internet, for anyone that wants to go looking, they couldn't be in a better time to find some of this music.

JV: Yeah.

GC: I love hearing that Leslie West invented heavy metal.

JV: Oh yeah, well, cats know, they all respect Leslie. Leslie's a really good friend of mine now and the fact that I got Johnny Winter and him and Al Kooper and all these cats stepped out of my record collection? That's all I need. That's the measure of my success, I think, that I can call these guys friends or walk into a room and we say hello to each other. And on some level appear, cuz I've played with most of these cats, and I can never, you know, get over that. I'm always gonna be a fan and I remember looking over the fence and thinking, I've got to get in this thing. Pick me last, but pick me.

GC: If I scan down a list of some of your high profile collaborations or people that you got to play with, one of the traits that leaps out at me is that, even for the ones that are in pretty established musical forms, there's an outside-the-box thinking, this wild unpredictable side; that's what I see when I see all of their names. I see Al Kooper, Jules Shear, Johnny Winter. I mean, Johnny Winter, to my ears, somehow his approach to the blues is simultaneously traditional and yet, in what comes out his fingers, unpredictable as all get out.

JV: Well, he's from Texas, Beaumont, Texas, he's a depressed Albino kid that's got this guitar and just lives in a room with it. And him and his brother both are musical geniuses, both of them, unbelievable - that their parents would have two Albino kids is incredibly strange anyway, and then for them to be just, alien geniuses, I'm not even sure they're from this planet.

GC: (Laughs) In the late eighties a friend of mine who needed a ride had tickets to see George Thorogood at an arena and I asked "is there an opening act?" and he said Johnny Winter - and I flipped! I knew he wasn't so much doing the rock and roll thing anymore - and I wondered what is he going to do with his more purist blues approach in front

of this big arena crowd? And he had a rhythm section on this tour that was like a blues version of Rush. The bass player was scat singing and playing harmonica while he was playing bass -

JV: That's Jon Farris.

GC: And Johnny held that - however many thousand people Nassau Colliseum holds - crowd in the palm of his hand. They were enthralled.

JV: They always loved Johnny in Long Island. The cats, everybody that I've run into has just been around. If I'm playing a club - I had a band with Harvey Brooks and we were playing a club called Hades on the upper East side, with a little big band, and Donald Fagen would come in and play with us. And we started working together and then Walter started coming around and then they got back together. So, to me, it's like - I would say, why are you guys wasting time not playing together? Now I say that touring is better - so they start touring together and to me, that's great music. That was late in the Seventies, Zappa, Steely Dan - this was stuff that caused punk to happen. (laughing) The knee-jerk reaction when kids say "I can't play that!" That's when punk came. And it happened again. After Van Halen. It happened again where grunge started. "We can't do that; let's do this".

GC: And the funny thing is, some of those grunge guys got pretty good themselves.

JV: Oh yeah. Dave Grohl is a great songwriter; maybe a better songwriter, dare I say it -

GC: I totally agree. And that's no disrespect to Kurt Cobain.

JV: Oh no disrespect to Kurt. But there is some mystique to dying. That makes you, it elevates you, unfortunately, because of what you could have done, maybe not because of what you have done in some cases.

GC: Going back to the artists you've worked with, the guy I really want to ask you about is Levon Helm.

JV: Oh well, you know, that's America. That music. Let me just say this about The Band. They made everybody that was at the top of their game in the UK doubt what they were doing. Clapton? Cream had to break up. He heard that record, Big Pink, and was like, I gotta be

doing this. That's when he started hanging out with Americans like Delaney and Bonnie. Elton John? Tumbleweed Connection comes out after he hears Big Pink. It's obvious that he's writing his own American Civil War record. I think George Harrison - if you hear early demos of The Beatles playing All Things Must Pass songs in rehearsal, they're playing and singing like they're The Band.

GC: Wow.

JV: Paul McCartney in that movie, when he walks into frame in that movie for the first time in Let It Be, I swear to God I think it's Garth Hudson. The coat he has on, the hair it's been slicked back and the beard, I think it's Garth Hudson. But it's McCartney. So I think that they changed everything. Bob Dylan, who knows, uh, more than anybody (laughs) but only tells us a little bit of it, knew that was the band. That's why they're The Band. And Levon is so the character you see in movies when he, you know, Coal Miner's Daughter, he plays the father? Or in The Right Stuff? That's just Levon; he's not acting. And you can see it in The Last Waltz. I feel like Robbie Robertson is scripted in that movie by Scorcese. But I see Levon talking and all of a sudden he's grabbing me from behind the camera. He's grabbing me by, he's looking at me, talking to me, and when Levon sings, and when Rick Danko and Richard Manuel sang, they made those stories come to life on those records. I mean it's, it's, it's - there's nothing like it. It's the greatest band. I just think it's the greatest band. They really are sincere in every word they sing. It's the greatest, man, what more can I say? Knowing him, I moved up to Woodstock and I lived like half a mile away. I went over there with Sebastian who I'd been doing stuff with already for years and I had met Levon a few times before then, he was always nice, always called me Jimmy V, always welcomed, a gentleman. I'll never get over Levon Helm. I can't get over it. It's - when you're on stage playing with him and you look over and it's Levon Helm. So what can I say? It's Beatle big, alright? (laughs) He didn't even love The Beatles. I even think his drum sound, Ringo's drum sound was influenced by his drum sound, you know?

GC: That's incredible. I was just a kid, such a huge Beatles fan, that when I first heard The Band I was like, why is this music so gripping, compelling? It didn't have any of the elements that usually appealed to me. But it was - it seemed almost haunted, with a depth of beauty and timeless -

JV: Yes. Haunted is the word. Haunted is the word. Yes. And it brings to mind everything, all of the magic of the South, comes to mind. They're a bunch of guys from Canada, by the way, except for Levon. Because they romanticized, again, like the Stones did, about Memphis and Chicago and Muddy Waters? It came out in their music as an original thing. Really, the Stones don't sound like black guys in Chicago playing, to me it's totally a different thing. We know where it came from. These guys come from mostly - Rick Danko was a country music fan. Garth Hudson played funeral homes and the Anglican Church, played sea shanties. And it's not blues based, his playing; it sounds more like it came off a pirate ship. And Robbie just oddly grabbed onto everything Roy Buchanan showed him, because Roy was playing with Ronnie Hawkins, Dale Hawkins, playing Suzie Q. So he learned from Burton and mostly from Roy, that squawky sound he got, you know? The harmonics and all that stuff and that go for it? And Rick Manuel was the greatest singer, the greatest white singer I heard. I always put Ray Charles as (number) one (laughs) and then there's after that. And then Robbie's collaboration or whatever you want to call it with the rest of those guys in making those stories come to life. As an observer more, Robbie was more of an observer of these characters. The stories came from the guys in the band. There's a lot of controversy about where collaboration ends and songwriting starts - I can't even get into that. But I know that it was guys living in a house or living in a van or living in a club and the stories came from their lives. If the credit wasn't done right, that's a tragedy; we have the music.

GC: Did I hear you correctly that you moved up to Woodstock to be near Levon?

JV: Not to be near him, no; but that's where John lives and I was working with Sebastian a lot and Jules lived up there at that time and it's a weekend place up there. I didn't live twenty-four hours. But the climate, there was still a little bit of the magic left in the air of the community. A lot of great people up there. Eric Weissberg still lives up there, Happy and Artie Traum still live there.

GC: I know Tony Levin lived there for some time as well.

JV: Tony and Pete Levin, and also Jerry Marotta lived there. Everybody was up there that, people I really loved, Marshall Crenshaw moved up in that direction. It seemed like a really good place to make music so I was working with John a lot at that time. With Levon, I - the thing that happened with him - I guess you can read this, you've probably read this, I was working with Johnnie Johnson and Happy Traum was doing an instructional

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video. Johnnie was showing his piano style. Levon had just gotten out of the hospital that day for his first radiation treatment. And he actually came over and said "Jimmy V, we oughtta get Johnnie over the house and record him while you got him up here." I thought that's a wacky fucking idea, I'm going to rent a piano and I'm going to bring Chris Anderson's truck - Chris Anderson has a studio that I work at a lot up there - and we did. We recorded, like, 16 tracks in one day. Levon and Mike Merritt and James Warwick and myself and Jim Wieder on guitar. Danko came over, he played some, Garth played some. And I did a second session where I said Lee, what if we get all the guys together and finish this record off? Would it be cool to bring Rick Danko and Richard Bell and Wieder and Randy and you and Garth and everybody in? And he said "Well, you know I, nobody can get ALL of us in one room, maybe you can." So - we did. And there's another 15, 16 tracks, there was like 30 tracks altogether when I was done. Now I've got it and I'm sitting on it. And I didn't ever put it out cuz guys were dying out from under the project. And I felt like, I don't want to be one of those, you know, buzzards.

GC: Right.

JV: Saying "Oh, I got this work by them and they're all gone now". So I just recently have been mixing it again and I can't get anybody, no one's interested in it, you know?

GC: See, that's mind-blowing to me.

JV: Nobody's interested in it, it's got some of their last work and they're really playing great. It's my record clearly, but, I got a pretty good band, between Johnnie Johnson and The Band, you know? Sebastian's on it and just the Woodstock community. And it's pre-Ramble. Right after that, I started working with Levon. I don't want to dwell on that record, it's kind of dead in the water. We tried to send it out to people and nobody really cares, they're like "whoa, the record business is hard now, and you can't tour - everybody's gone" And I said what about a historical document? Does anybody give a shit anymore?

GC: I just want to say that any of your peers that know you, nobody would think you were trying to exploit this. It's like finding an unheard Mozart or something.

JV: I'm just sitting on it again now. I think I'll finish it off and then I'LL listen to it. (laughs) Play it for my friends at a Christmas party. The next generation thinks music is free any way, and so why should anybody put any money into anything?

GC: Yeah, yeah (sighs).

JV: Luckily I don't have to make a living on this record. It's sad in a way. But the good news was Levon and I, we started writing songs, this actually pre-dated those sessions. We wrote a couple of songs together while he was convalescing. Then he started playing drums again and I said let's put this band The Barn Burners together. Because he wanted to play. I think it was the best therapy for him to keep playing. One night we started these rambles, you know? We started doing the Midnight Rambles and that was a great thing. He talks about it in The Last Waltz. His idea was let's not go out and play, let's bring the people to my house. (laughs) It's a great idea.

GC: That was way ahead of it's time. People in England started doing this stuff with a webcam and the press were like "it's a new thing!"

JV: It's such an old idea that it's new. We'll have a barn raising and we'll have a hoedown afterwards. People will play, bring your food. People brought food and it was almost like this anachronistic behavior and it caught on. That was a wonderful thing. It might have been, I can't remember, I want to say a writer that said Levon Helm had the best encore in the music business. Because he got three Grammys in that ten year period. And he got none with The Band. So... it was bittersweet but he lived for that. He lived another ten years for that. For the Ramble. So there's no one - people always become family to me, Johnnie Johnson and Sebastian, and Levon was just - one of my favorite people ever. I miss him to this day, every day.

GC: I heard the song that you wrote for him and what reminded me of him wasn't so

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much the lyrics as this thing you do when you're turning around the chorus (sings). I said this is magic.

JV: It had that drag. Levon would say "that was Richard's thing, to just twist it around a little bit, make it a little different". That was The Band, man; there'll never be anything like that again. Same with The Beatles. When you look at both those bands, in that short period of time, the amount of output.

GC: It's like the musical equivalent to the atomic age or the industrial revolution. An explosion of progress that's so fast you almost can't track it. Like a musical Big Bang or something.

JV: Is it called The Knick, this HBO show about medicine at the turn of the century about a hospital? There's a great line one guy says: "The medical field has advanced more in five years than it has in the last 500." It's almost like rock and roll in that period was just boom, you know? Johnny Winter used to say "Chuck Berry was my Jimi Hendrix." He was a peer of Jimi Hendrix. And I think that Bob Dylan was to Jimi Hendrix what Jimi Hendrix was to Stevie Ray Vaughan. It's amazing how all of these people co-existed within the era at the same time in a very short period of time. Bob for songwriting? Bob changed songwriting quicker than - the idea of what lyrics in a song were, when "Like A Rolling Stone" hit, it was like what is this? Frank Zappa had to pull over, he was going to crash his car.

GC: Joni Mitchell said it had a similar effect on her; she thought Oh my God, I can do anything now.

JV: That's what I said earlier. It allowed us, as kids, to say "I can do this!" Even if you get a little bit of it, you could be a genius.

GC: If I don't ask you a couple of the questions I have about your own work -

JV: Please do, please do.

GC: Although this is going to be, historically anyway, the best article that's ever appeared in Guitar Connoisseur, I'll tell you that right now.

JV: It's like a book! It's a book we're working on! But go ahead.

GC: (laughing) If I scan your discography, I see that the blues is huge for you. At the same time, there's almost this other side to you, with The Fab Faux, all the stuff you grew up with, that I think - and I'm just guessing - informs even your blues solos with a melodic sense.

JV: That's because the blues is supposed to be the way you feel as a player. Not the way you do B.B. King or you do Albert King or you do Stevie Ray Vaughan. It's not meant to be a mimicking art form or style of playing. It's meant to be your blues. You shouldn't be playing somebody else's blues. You have to learn doing that, yes; but it's kind of - you can take a lot of it but you have to have yourself in it. Sometimes it's hard, I'll say, man, that's too much like Muddy. And I'll hear guys that I can hear where their influences come from. When I listen to Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks, who I just think are the best two guitar players on the planet right now, for me, for what I like. And Sonny Landreth. And I'll keep naming guys. And those three guys all cut their teeth on Duane Allman and on Elmore James. But when they play, they sound like them. Derek has incorporated all kinds of Arabic scales, Asian things into his playing; Warren is just like a hodgepodge of everything he's ever learned. And I strive for that. I heard that in John Scofield, who is, you know, on another planet from where we live. There's guys in the galaxy who are so far away from where I'll ever be but I can at least appreciate them. And Scofield will occasionally fall into a B.B. King lick. I'm the opposite. I'll play like B.B. King and occasionally fall into a Scofield lick.

GC: (laughing)

JV: (laughs) The beauty is you have to weave in and out of everything you've ever played. Yeah. George Harrison has become a bigger influence to me now than he ever was. His slide playing is beautiful, right up to the very end. He found his voice on the slide guitar. I'm still looking for my voice. If you say you hear it, that's great; it's just news to me.

GC: Well, when I hear The Black Italians version of Light Up Or Leave Me Alone,

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the original is classic, but it also has a laid back vibe. I don't know if it was the powdered velvet jackets in the cover photo or... (laughs)

JV: They were laid back.

GC: Whereas your band playing this, your guitar solo is fiery and biting, like you're wide awake, on top of your game and really in the moment; and your entire band sounds like they're having the time of their lives.

JV: We're playing live, that was the idea, to be in front of people. Cuz if we were in a studio it might have gotten laid back. But I always thought Waiting For Columbus by Little Feat was their greatest album because it was a live album. And I never thought their studio albums came even close to what they felt like live. And I always wanted to make a record that was like that to me. That's why that treatment of that song Fat Man is very Little Feat-like, the very first song. My influences, I wear 'em on my sleeve, I don't give a shit. Johnny Winter? I put him out there. Steve Winwood and Capaldi and James Brown? They're all in the room. They're in my head.

GC: On the song Fool's Gold, I noticed you phrased the chords differently in the second verse than the first. It took me into a completely different emotion. The vocal on that is incredible, of course, and the buildup of passion by the whole band, by the end of the tune, it feels like a rocket's taking off.

JV: That's something I wrote way back and Catherine Russell recorded with me way back on one of the first Vivino Brothers records. We never really got it like the way we got it that night, because it matured. You know that happens a lot? You write a song and record it right away and then years later, it's really ready to be recorded. That whole 12/8, 6/8 vibe is such a gospel thing, it's so rooted in gospel. And Catherine just nails it. She can sing that stuff better than anyone. I love her. She just gets it. She's one of the greatest singers, I can't say enough. Her history, her father was Luis Russell, who was Louis Armstrong's piano player and arranger for years. And her mother Carlene Raye was Etta James' bass player.

GC: Wow.

JV: Yeah and played with Ray Charles also. She's just got music, music, music coming out of her. So anyway, that record was a long time coming and I'm glad it's out there. It got us to headline the King Biscuit festival in Arkansas, which is seriously, since Levon's not around, I have a lot of family there because of him, extended family now.

GC: At the end of that performance, with me and every other listener wanting more, I thought to myself this band could do anything they want. And bands like Mad Dogs and Englishmen come to mind, or Edgar Winter's White Trash. But your band has this total versatility where I could see you doing a record that was two thirds covers but your own arrangements of everything from King's X to James Taylor and all points in between.

JV: Oh there's so much good music, I think the good music's all been written. But then occasionally I'll hear something man, and go wow, that's really good! Sure, covers? I learned that from Al Kooper. He'd play some amazing song and I'd say did you write that and he'd say no, that was so and so, that was Ashford and Simpson. But these are songwriters. A good song is going to stand up to a good band, it's going to really work. There's stuff we recorded that we didn't use, it happens. The more standard blues stuff wasn't what we want when we have all this percussion going, you know? And this wild Felix Cabrera, this Cuban harp player, one of my oldest friends. It was more like let's get together in a barn and put a show on, have people there and record it, cuz this was a band that was only together, once a week we play live at down time.

GC: Jumping to another band entirely, has The Fab Faux done some of the Yellow Submarine stuff like Only A Northern Song, It's All Too Much or Hey Bulldog?

JV: I think there's only about five songs that we haven't done.

GC: (laughing) From the entire Beatles catalog? That's great!

JV: We've even done You Know My Name (Look Up The Number) and we do Revolution 9. You should see us when we come up to Boston. Are you up there still?

GC: No, actually I live in Jersey, I'm hoping to see you at The White Album show in November.

JV: Oh you've gotta come to that!

GC: You're doing another one where it's sort of like a boxing match, who's the better songwriter –

JV: At the Beacon Theater! Paul versus John, it's the age old question, right? I hope people understand what we're getting at. They should understand, right? It goes back to my friends and I and the old fan magazines, "Who's better, Beatles or Stones?" Remember that?

GC: Yup.

JV: The John-Paul thing has always been an argument, the cute one versus the sour one. And the fact is they both have more going on, songwriting-wise, than just about anyone, so together? It was the best.

GC: My editor will hang me (laughs) if I don't ask you something about the Conan show, so how much say do you get in choice of tunes to play in the breaks?

JV: Since we are not on network anymore and don't have a huge budget, we play whatever we want in the middle. Going out? I write bumpers. I write ins and outs. But then we go into whatever we want. That's a lot of the stuff, some Delaney and Bonnie stuff, some Otis Redding in there, even some Lou Reed tunes are there. (laughs) It's everything and anything. And Conan is a good guitar player. For his last birthday, myself and

Jimmy Vivino

the producer and the head of TBS bought him a 55 Strat. It looks just like Buddy Holly's, worn out and everything. A real one. He wears it around his neck all day and he plays all day. So much of our show is about guitar and music, it's always been that way. We've had a connection, I've been fortunate enough to be there for 21 years and to have been arranging for this band and leading this band for a long time. Also, to be playing with people I love. It's the same band for the most part, minus one guy who replaced the original guy anyway. When he called me and said "I need a band", our drummer James Wormworth who was working with The Vivino Brothers and Johnnie Johnson was put out of a gig. So we came back to him and the only thing I can say about that situation is everybody is doing exactly what they should be doing and playing with exactly who they should. Because that situation, with Bruce? Nobody's better for that situation than the guy he's been using for years. Like The Rolling Stones, all the guys in it are the right guys.

GC: Where that's the band. You can do one experimental record where you use all these different guys, but…

JV: Yeah. He's got Porcaro and Gary Mallaber on drums, who are great players, but it's like replacing Levon in The Band with a studio musician. The floppy jalopy comes from bad springs, you know? (laughing) It comes from everybody pulling together to make the thing go down the road.

GC: (laughing) That's a great analogy. I'm going to end with a really silly question. When I was looking at your discography, I noticed one glaring ommission. I did not see Triumph The Insult Comic Dog's Come Poop With Me and I wondered is there any way that Jimmy is not on this record somewhere?

JV: I'm totally on it, totally. I produced a lot of it with Robert. And wrote a lot of it with him, yeah. A lot of the songs were co-written with me and him. But I don't think the Uncle Floyd album's on there either. So I'm short on Comedy. But you know, I've only really ever worked with one artiste and that was Laura Nyro, who was a genius from another planet; I've worked with a lot of great musicians, I've been lucky; I'm not done, but like I said to someone else that asked me recently what's the crowning achievement? And I said, knowing the people that stepped out of my records, into my life, as flesh and blood. All of them, every one of them, lives up to every expectation I've ever had, including Chuck Berry. Playing with Chuck, it's like being insulted by Rickles, you want to be.

GC: (laughing)

JV: At the end of the day, pre-Bob Dylan, who was the greatest songwriter of our day? Chuck Berry. I think so.

GC: I saw him in Hawaii during that brief period of time when FM radio decided to play "Reeling And Rocking" and "My Ding-a-ling" and he looked out at the audience of 8,000 people and said "You're all my children, whether you know it or not."

JV: Exactly. And he was not treated right, you know? He mellowed now, he's very old, God bless him; but he wasn't treated right. He was set up, The Mann Act, all that crap? A brown-eyed handsome man that your daughters are going to see play? (laughs) Forget it, you know? But boy, look at the poetry, and you, as a writer, if you read, if you listen to those songs, My God! The poetry, the alliteration, all the things in literature that he just naturally did.

GC: Well I don't think any of the English guitarists would have been playing double stops in The British Invasion if they hadn't heard him doing it.

JV: He invented, I mean, yes, he got that from T-Bone Walker, there were guys doing it, but nobody combined it with country guitar like him. The records are great. They're made up there at Chess, they sound great, they're alive. They're funky at the same time. There's a real, raucous, speaking to all youth, black, white, Latino, anybody would dig what Chuck Berry's saying, any kid has the same angst that Chuck Berry was writing about.

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